

# A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FAIRY TALES IN ANTIQUITY

Edited by Debbie Felton



BLOOMSBURY

# A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FAIRY TALES

VOLUME 1

## **A Cultural History of Fairy Tales**

*General Editor: Anne E. Duggan*

### **Volume 1**

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in Antiquity

*Edited by Debbie Felton*

### **Volume 2**

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Middle Ages

*Edited by Susan Aronstein*

### **Volume 3**

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Age of the Marvelous

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A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Long Eighteenth Century

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### **Volume 5**

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Long Nineteenth Century

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### **Volume 6**

A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Modern Age

*Edited by Andrew Teverson*

A CULTURAL HISTORY  
OF FAIRY TALES

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IN  
ANTIQUITY  
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*Dedicated to Jen, Dan, and the rest of the folks at Leo's Table  
in South Deerfield, for providing space, nourishment,  
and—perhaps most importantly—caffeine!*



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## SERIES PREFACE

Taking a transnational approach, *A Cultural History of the Fairy Tale* seeks to deepen our appreciation for and knowledge about a type of *text* (understood in the broadest sense of the term) that is often taken for granted due to its association with children's literature, old wives' tales, and oral peasant culture. Whether we think of the Brothers Grimm or films by Walt Disney Studios, fairy tales are often viewed as naïve and timeless stories with universal appeal, which suggests they are ahistorical, innocent narratives. This series brings together scholars from a diversity of disciplines to challenge many of these preconceptions about the fairy tale, shedding light on its very complex cultural history.

The chapters included in these six volumes foreground how the fairy tale was deployed in different historical periods and geographical locations for all kinds of cultural, social, and political ends that cross categories of class, age, gender, and ethnicity. "Fairy tale" here serves as a broad umbrella term for what more generally could be referred to as "wonder tale," which encompasses but is not limited to texts that feature fairies, witches, enchanters, djinn, and other beings endowed with magical or supernatural powers; anthropomorphized animals; metamorphosis (humans transformed into animals or other objects and vice versa); magical objects; and otherworlds and liminal spaces. "Fairy tale" also refers to texts that may not include any of these qualities but have been received as—that is, read or categorized as or are generally considered to be—a fairy tale.

By moving from antiquity to the present and transnationally, chapters crossing the six volumes foreground, for instance, how ancient animal fables present both continuities and discontinuities with the representation of animals in later wonder tales; how conceptions of fairies, djinn, and other magical

characters change across historical periods and geographical locations; and how the very notion of what is marvelous, natural, or supernatural is understood differently across space and time. Chapters showcase the range of different types of characters and themes one can find in wonder tales as well as the multiple forms and functions tales can take. Together these volumes paint a broad picture of the ways in which different national tale traditions interact with and mutually influence each other, giving us a transnational and transhistorical understanding of the fairy tale. Indeed, readers will discover the rich, complex, and often ideologically charged cultural history of texts that can seem so familiar to us, which helps us understand them in new and exciting ways.

All six volumes cover the same eight themes for the reader to gain a sense of continuities and discontinuities between types of characters, narratives, and traditions over time. Readers will move from *forms* of the fairy tale and the ancillary genres that fed into it to the history of *adaptations*, revealing the ways in which tales are always already a blend of multiple local, regional, and national traditions. A genre often focusing on questions related to development and initiation into adulthood and sometimes (less than we might think) concluding with marriage, tales often feature the norms of *gender and sexuality* grounded in a particular culture. Through the prevalence of non-human characters and problematic human figures, the fairy tale allows for the exploration of the boundaries between *the human and the non-human*, as well as between what is considered normal and *monsters or the monstrous*. As a nonmimetic genre, generally speaking, the fairy tale also plays with the delimitations between real and imaginary *spaces*, opening up both utopic and dystopic possibilities. Tales have often been used in the processes of *socialization*, for both children and adults, men and women, articulating class, gender, and ethnic differences. As such, tales cannot be separated from questions of *power* and ideology.

This cultural history of fairy tales is divided into the following historical periods:

Volume 1: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in Antiquity (500 BCE–800 CE)

Volume 2: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Middle Ages (800–1450)

Volume 3: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Age of the Marvelous (1450–1650)

Volume 4: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Long Eighteenth Century (1650–1800)

Volume 5: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Long Nineteenth Century (1800–1920)

Volume 6: A Cultural History of Fairy Tales in the Modern Age (1920–2000+)

Readers will come away with a new and fresh understanding of the fairy tale, which indeed enhances our appreciation for a genre that has touched many of us since childhood. Far from being naïve, innocent, timeless texts, *A Cultural History of Fairy Tales* foregrounds the ways wonder tales are embedded in sophisticated social, cultural, political, and artistic practices across history, anchored in specific cultural contexts that shape their meaning as tales are adapted from one cultural and historical context to another.

Anne E. Duggan, *General Editor*



## ABBREVIATIONS

Aes.	Aesop
AP	<i>Anthologia Palatina</i>
ATU	Uther, H.-J. (2004), <i>The Types of International Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson</i> , Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.
B	Babrius
FGrH	Jacoby, Felix (1923–59), <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> , Berlin: Weidmann.
G	Gibbs, Laura (2008), <i>Aesop's Fables</i> , Oxford: Oxford University Press.
G.-P.	Gow, A. S. F. and D. L. Page, eds. (1965), <i>Hellenistic Epigrams</i> , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<i>Mythographi Vaticanani</i>	Kulcsár, Péter, ed. (1987), <i>Mythographi Vaticanani I et II</i> , Turnhout: Brepols.
P	Perry, Ben E. (1952), <i>Aesopica: A Series of Text Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him or Closely Connected with the Literary Tradition That Bears His Name</i> , 2 vols, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
PMG	Page, D. L., ed. (1962), <i>Poetae Melici Graeci</i> , Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
<i>Suda</i>	Adler, Ada, ed. (1967–71), <i>Suidae Lexicon</i> , 2nd edn., Stuttgart: Teubner.
TrGF	Snell, Bruno, Stefan Radt, and Richard Kannicht, eds. (1981–2004), <i>Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta</i> , 5 vols, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

# Introduction

## *Ancient Analogues for Modern Tales*

DEBBIE FELTON

Once upon a time, there was a girl called Rose-Red. One day, while she was bathing, an eagle swooped down and snatched one of her slippers. Soaring away, it flew directly over the head of the king and dropped the slipper in his lap. Deeply impressed by both the artistry of the slipper and the astonishing event, he sent his messengers out across the land to discover the slipper's owner. When she was found, the king married her.

Most readers will recognize that this story shares several motifs with the “Cinderella” tale (ATU 510A). I have intentionally omitted several details so as to highlight the basic plot; without the specifics, identifying this story as belonging to a definite time period might be difficult. But the girl's name is actually Rhodopis (Greek for “rosy-faced”), she happens to be a courtesan, the slipper in this story is more precisely a sandal, and the setting is ancient Egypt. Rhodopis lived in the city of Naucratis, a Greek colony along the Nile Delta, while the king reigned in Memphis, about sixty miles upriver.<sup>1</sup> The story, as recorded by the Greek geographer and historian Strabo (c. 64 BCE–c. 24 CE), is only six lines long (*Geography* 17.1.33). The narrative lacks the elaborative details and motifs more familiar from the Brothers Grimm version, which positions Cinderella (“little ash girl”) as the abused stepdaughter weeping at her mother's grave, the white bird (representing her mother's spirit) providing beautiful clothes and jewelry so that Cinderella can go to the ball, the two stepsisters cutting off bits of their feet to fit the golden slipper, and so on. But there is little doubt that the story of Rhodopis stands as an early analogue to that of Cinderella, and that one of the main themes of “Cinderella,” that of social upward mobility, is present even in this early analogue from well over two thousand years ago.<sup>2</sup>

That said, I use the phrase “little doubt” (rather than “no doubt”) to point to an ongoing disagreement among scholars of folktale, fairy tale, and classical literature as to whether fairy tales existed even in preliminary form in classical antiquity. Folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer, for example, argues vehemently against accepting the story of Rhodopis as a version of what became the classic fairy tale, stating that one of the most important aspects of the Cinderella tale is the shoe’s small size and the fact that it fits only one owner: “However, Rhodopis’s shoe, dropped by an eagle into a pharaoh’s lap, wasn’t small, or at least, Strabo doesn’t say it was .... In Strabo’s account, the marvel was not the shoe’s smallness but the eagle’s accurate aim” (2010: 453) (Figure 0.1). Strabo, however, does in fact equally emphasize both the eagle’s aim and the king’s reaction to the sandal; the king—and Strabo does use the Greek βασιλεύς (*basileus*), not the Egyptian “pharaoh”—is moved by the sandal’s ῥυθμός (*rhuthmos*), a Greek term that admits of various meanings, including anything from “symmetry,” “shape,” and “fashion” to “proportion.” While most likely referring to the impressive artistry of the sandal, or possibly, as Gregory Nagy (2015) suggests, showing “a *rhuthmos* that apparently conveys the beauty of the girl’s



FIGURE 0.1: The Eagle Brings Rhodopis’s Slipper to the King of Memphis. Public domain.

dance-steps” (cf. the English cognate “rhythm”),<sup>3</sup> the term could perhaps just as well allude to delicate size. But straining this last point is hardly necessary when Bottigheimer’s insistence on “small size” already comes across as odd, inasmuch as Strabo’s story clearly indicates that, regardless of size, the shoe clearly had only one owner and that the king made a countrywide search for that owner.

But Bottigheimer rightly cautions against concluding that a modern fairy tale existed in the past “just because a motif familiar from more recent fairy tales was also present in the past,” which leads to her question about the story’s plot: “What of the poor heroine Rhodopis who marries a pharaoh? Does she not experience a rise?” (2010: 453). This refers to whether Strabo’s story constitutes a “rise tale,” a type of fairy tale in which a lowly hero/heroine climbs the socioeconomic ladder with the help of a “magical” benefactor, such as happens in the traditional “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast” tales. Bottigheimer argues that Rhodopis does not experience a rise because “Rhodopis has little in common with the suffering associated with most modern sex workers,” given that courtesans in the ancient world were relatively well-educated women “whose marketable skills included political knowledge and lively wit as well as sex,” and who often purveyed these skills “in luxurious surroundings” (453). Relying on this bit of misleading information (a refutation of which would require an entirely separate essay), Bottigheimer concludes that “instead of denoting a ‘poor heroine’ consistent with the pattern of a rise fairy tale, Rhodopis’s profession thus places her within an ancient grouping of often beautiful and always savvy women who lived outside and beyond conventional social strictures. Shoe or not, Rhodopis’s story is no ‘Cinderella’ tale” (453). And yet, not much later, Bottigheimer points out that the heroine in typical “Cinderella” tales starts out in the early seventeenth century as a prince’s daughter, and that her social status deteriorates slowly over the centuries until, by the late nineteenth century, she is a girl from a poor family elevated by marriage into a much wealthier family (467). This would seem to contradict the exclusionary criterion she uses on Rhodopis. Bottigheimer uses a similar argument to disqualify Apuleius’s “Cupid and Psyche” story as a rise tale and even as a fairy tale at all (463),<sup>4</sup> despite broad agreement that “Cupid and Psyche” is indeed “the classic fairy tale” or, at the very minimum, “the most fairytale-like of all ancient stories” (Anderson 2020: 17; Hansen 2002: 106). In its scale and rococo-like literary detail it resembles the French fairy tales produced from the late seventeenth century onward; its author Apuleius was, like Charles Perrault, highly educated; and despite its presence as a story embedded within the larger narrative of the *Metamorphoses*, “Cupid and Psyche” is entirely self-contained and could easily stand on its own even were it entirely removed from the novel’s context—as indeed it has been, many times over the last two millennia (Anderson 2019b: 31).

Bottigheimer’s dim view of “Rhodopis” and “Cupid and Psyche” as fairy tales may seem extreme, but she is hardly the only one arguing against them.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars who specialize in both folktales and classical literature agree that Rhodopis qualifies as an early analogue for the later fairy tale, even if only as “mere narrative outlines,” while “Cupid and Psyche” is a full-blown fairy tale in its own right (Anderson 2020: 17–44, 55; cf. Anderson 2019b: 25–6, 30–2; Hansen 2002: 85–9).<sup>6</sup> This brings us to the question of plot vs. genre. While it is clear that the Rhodopis story contains motifs familiar to those in “Cinderella,” that there is a sufficiently “supernatural” element in the eagle’s unusual aim, and that “The ancient legend corresponds to the final episodes of the oral tale, when the prince seeks the owner of the shoe and then weds her” (Hansen 2002: 86), as the quote from William Hansen in the first part of this sentence referring to the Rhodopis story as a “legend” suggests, genre variance is an important aspect to consider. Drawing on traditionally accepted definitions, Hansen further notes, “many stories that in modern times are attested as folktales are found in ancient societies as legends,” the distinction being that

the modern tales generally take place in anonymous localities, are set in the indefinite past, and feature generic characters who are nameless or bear conventional folktale names such as Jack ... whereas ancient Greek stories typically are situated in real place in the Greek world, are located at a definite point in the flow of time, and are peopled by allegedly historical characters.  
(Hansen 2002: 8–9; cf. Thompson 1946: 8)

The question then is not whether the story of Rhodopis is really an ancient fairy tale so much as whether we can consider the story of Rhodopis an early analogue for the Cinderella fairy tale. The response is “Yes,” if by “analogue” we signify a story that shares features with other stories, whether they derive from a shared oral or literary tradition or developed independently from an even earlier, unidentified source. In short, “analogue” may be a more widely acceptable term to use when discussing stories from classical antiquity, inasmuch as it avoids suggesting that an earlier work is the source of a later work while also avoiding definitively labeling such stories as “fairy tales,” let alone the more specific “rise” subtype of fairy tale.

In contrast, “Cupid and Psyche” begins thus: *erant in quadam civitate rex et regina*—“In a certain kingdom there lived a king and his queen.” Like the quintessential fairy tales, this story takes place in an indefinite time in the past, in a world that resembles our own yet has supernatural elements. Like characters in fairy tales, those inhabiting “Cupid and Psyche” are more generic than specific. Although Psyche, Cupid, Venus, Ceres, and the others have seemingly specific names, those names also stand for abstract concepts: “Psyche” is the soul, “Cupid” is desire, and the various deities can all be interpreted metaphorically as aspects of life—Venus as sexuality, Ceres as agriculture, and so on, leading to occasional interpretations of this tale as allegory. Moreover, the king, queen, and envious sisters remain unnamed, and the tale contains dozens of motifs familiar

from fairy tales (e.g., ants helping the protagonist sort a pile of mixed grains). The story also clearly contains both metaphorical and literal references to the rites of passage so common to later fairy tales, such as the transition from childhood to adulthood to parenthood—including maturation, coming of age, family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, courtship and sexuality, and the risks and rewards of socialization (Canepa 2019b: 325). And although Psyche starts out as a princess, she undergoes a significant loss of status at two separate points. First, a wrathful Venus dictates that Psyche must be married to the basest possible man, and the girl's parents mournfully prepare her for this fate. Second, although she actually marries Cupid (without anyone initially realizing it), she betrays his trust, and he abandons her. This results in her wandering—desperate, destitute, and pregnant!—around the country in search of him, being verbally and physically abused by his hostile mother, and despairing so much at times that she becomes suicidal. Cupid at last forgives her, and by the end Psyche is not only restored to her position by his side but elevated to the status of goddess. This sounds suspiciously like a rise tale, as noted by Jan Ziolkowski, a specialist in medieval fairy tales (Ziolkowski 2007, 2010: 377).<sup>7</sup>

I've included the controversies above about “Rhodopis” and “Cupid and Psyche” as examples of the complexities involved in agreeing as to what constitutes a “fairy tale,”<sup>8</sup> but even more so to address the difficulties in identifying a “history” of fairy tales. This volume is one of six that examine the fairy tale across specific time periods, including not only antiquity but also the Middle Ages, the age of the marvelous, the long eighteenth century, the long nineteenth century, and the modern age itself, taking “history” in the sense of something that existed in the past that can be collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The existence of such a series would seem to presuppose that fairy tales did indeed exist in antiquity, but the disagreement discussed above demonstrates no such consensus. Consequently, it is also helpful to render “history” (ἱστορία) in its original Greek sense of “inquiry” or “research,” which allows us to finesse not only the question of whether fairy tale existed in antiquity but also whether we can at minimum identify embryonic forms of what eventually became, indisputably, fairy tales. If many folklore scholars prefer to consider fairy tales as a separate genre, not usually embedded within larger narratives, and as having certain immutable elements, we may or may not wish to engage in ongoing debate with them, especially given that the terminological problems of “fairy tale” are in truth so extensive as to lie beyond the scope of the current discussion.<sup>9</sup> But we can at the very least point to early *analogues* for later fairy tales.

If we extend our range in this way not only to familiar fairy tales as such but also to myths, legends, and other types of folklore such as fables—all of which were present in antiquity from China to South Asia to the Near East and Mediterranean regions—we find a substantial amount of evidence indicating early oral transmission and written analogues for later tale types, including later



fairy tales.<sup>10</sup> For example, many ancient Chinese stories tell of the destructive nature of fox spirits—foxes believed to change themselves into beautiful women to seduce men. One such tale may date back to the Shang Dynasty of the second millennium BCE. According to legend, the fox spirit Tah Fei beguiled King Cheu, resulting in the Dynasty's fall in 1122 BCE. Similarly, legend tells that a fox spirit caused the destruction of the Western Chou Dynasty in 781 BCE by insinuating itself into the favor of Emperor Yiu. Over in India, the *Rig Veda* (c. 1200 BCE), a Hindu collection of Sanskrit hymns to the gods (such as Indra, Surya, and Viṣṇu, among many others) and one clearly derived from oral tradition, contains the earliest known version of a swan-maiden tale, that of Urvaśī and Purūravas.<sup>11</sup> Such tales form early analogues for ATU 400, "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife," particularly type (3), in which a youth sees a flock of birds (such as swans) land on the shore, take off their feather "coats," and become beautiful maidens. The youth steals the feather coat of the most beautiful girl, who must marry him; later, through some careless act on the part of the youth (or his mother), the girl regains her coat and flies away, and the young man must search for her in some kind of "otherworld." Also related to ATU 400 is the story of Rāma (an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu) and his beloved wife Sītā, representing the ideal Indian concepts of manhood and womanhood. When Sītā is abducted by the demon-king Rāvaṇa, Rāma goes on an epic search for her. This story forms the basis for the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. second century BCE), attributed to the poet Vālmīki and widely considered the earliest written version of an even more ancient tale—one that appealed to Buddhists as well. These early Hindu and Buddhist traditions, dating back to at least the second and first millennia BCE, also contain many other early folkloric analogues to later fairy tales, as well as providing early versions of several well-known animal fables.

Animal fables appear even earlier in the ancient Near East, in the third millennium BCE in Mesopotamia and Sumeria, with the fox playing an especially prominent role. Also from Sumeria of this period comes an early analogue of ATU 300, "The Dragon Slayer," in a story relating the exploits of the god Ninurta, who slays a variety of demons and other monstrous creatures, as told in the epic poem *Lugale* (Frazer 2017). Variants on this tale type, including early versions of succession myths, show up in many Near Eastern myths, including the Hurrian-Hittite poems *Kingship in Heaven* and the *Song of Ullikummi*, dating to approximately the fourteenth century BCE.<sup>12</sup> In these stories, a warrior-sky god from a younger generation gains cosmic supremacy by defeating older generations of gods, depicted as terrifying monsters. Similarly, in the second-millennium BCE Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu battle and vanquish formidable opponents including Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. These and many other types of folktale survive from the region, and in short, there remains no question that "a fully developed system of oral literature featuring well-known genres and plots

existed already at the beginning of the second millennium BCE all over the Ancient Near East,” including early, fully developed versions of many familiar folktales, if not fairy tales proper (Jason and Kempinski 1981: 6).

Similarly, in Egypt, we find some of the earliest analogues for several other well-known folk and fairy tales, as Egypt preserves some of the oldest tales on record. The story of “The Shipwrecked Sailor,” in which a sailor recounts how he washed up on an island inhabited by a wondrous serpent, dates to the Middle Kingdom period (c. 2050–1720 BCE) and provides the earliest known analogue to later “wonder voyage” tales such as the wanderings of the Greek Odysseus and the Baghdadian Sinbad the Sailor, the latter incorporated into the Near Eastern collection of tales known as *The Thousand and One Nights* (c. eighth to fourteenth centuries CE) sometime in the early eighteenth century by Antoine Galland. From the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1780–1570 BCE, overlapping the end of the Middle Kingdom), the Westcar Papyrus preserves five Egyptian tales of wonder-workers performing magic for the pharaoh, while the New Kingdom period (c. 1570–1070 BCE) has handed down the story of “The Doomed Prince,” which tells of a newborn prince destined to die through an encounter with a crocodile, a snake, or dog, providing a very early version of ATU 934, “Tales of the Predestined Death.” This Egyptian tale’s supernatural elements and apparently uplifting ending have resulted in its inclusion in at least one fairy-tale anthology.<sup>13</sup> Also from the New Kingdom comes the “Tale of Two Brothers”—sometimes called “Anpu and Bata” after the brothers—the earliest surviving version of the better-known “Potiphar’s Wife” (Genesis 38:6–20) in which an older woman propositions a younger man who rejects her advances, resulting in her taking vengeance by accusing the young man of various inappropriate behaviors, a tale also familiar from ancient Greece via Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 BCE).<sup>14</sup> The main part of these tales comprises ATU 318, “The Faithless Wife,” while the “Tale of Two Brothers” includes elements from not only 318 but also 302B and 870C (“Life Dependent on a Sword” and “The Princess Confined in the Mound,” respectively). In addition to many tales directly from Egypt itself, we have a number of stories set in Egypt, such as that of Rhodopis as well as the story of King Rhampsinitus and his treasury (ATU 950), that may or may not be of Egyptian origin but that appear in the works of Greek writers and date back to the first millennium CE.

Alongside the clear presence of many early folktale variants throughout the Asian continent and Egypt, a large portion of our evidence for the earliest folk and fairy tales—or at least their analogues—comes from ancient Greece and Rome because of the quantity of surviving literature. Consequently, most of the chapters in this volume focus on literary evidence from the classical period through late antiquity—that is, works written in Greek and Latin from the eighth century BCE through the sixth century CE. A great deal of folklore in the general sense survives from classical antiquity, including not only myths,



legends, and folktales but also proverbs, riddles, songs, and many other subtypes of lore.<sup>15</sup> Aesopic and other fables, most of which are classified as tale types within the ATU index, are especially prominent, given their ability to express metaphorically—and thus safely—direct criticism of political figures and societal values. Even if, unlike fables, most other kinds of folktale were not generally recognized as such—in contrast to epic and lyric poetry, tragedy, comedy, or paradoxography (among others), which were understood as their own discrete genres even in antiquity—they were clearly familiar to the earliest storytellers, appearing as embedded narratives within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, written versions of which date to the eighth century BCE, themselves most likely based on oral versions passed down from the thirteenth century. Other first-millennium BCE Greek literature is clearly based on Near Eastern precedents; this sort of transmission from East to West occurred with increasing frequency as ancient cultures began to interact more regularly with each other, to the extent that it is not always possible to tell in which culture a story, such as an animal fable, originated. In fact, many very ancient sources, such as those from the Near East that survive only in fragments, exist principally as reported in later sources. A Greek author, for example, might report an Egyptian tale that does not appear in any surviving Egyptian sources, such as Herodotus's "Rhampsinitus and the Thief," mentioned above. For that matter, some Greek and Roman tales survive only as reported in medieval authors, as is the case with a number of ancient fables.

Of course, we do not necessarily need to identify a definite place or date of origin to understand the purpose of a tale, and one of the reasons folktales survive for millennia is their ease of adaptation across cultures and contexts. As mentioned above, fables proliferated and spread precisely because of their ability to act as metaphors while reinforcing positive or, more often, critiquing negative and particularly foolish human behavior. And folktales in general have had significant social functions for as long as such stories have been recorded: not only to entertain children and adults alike, but also to provide guidance for dealing with everyday life as well as to reinforce societal roles and hierarchies. As Maria Nikoajeva points out, we engage with folk and fairy tales in large part because we can relate fictional situations to our own experiences, "making inferences from fictional characters that might prove helpful in real life" (2019: 197). Perhaps not surprisingly, as the most complete and detailed version of a fairy tale from the ancient world "Cupid and Psyche" dominates much of the discussion in this volume, especially with regard to the function of such tales. As I explained earlier, this story illustrates many of the principal themes and concerns expected of and demonstrated by fairy tales from the late seventeenth century on, such as a young girl's journey both literally and metaphorically to adulthood and motherhood. Yet aside from "Cupid and Psyche," readers may be surprised overall not only by the vast number of familiar folktales present

from first-millennium BCE Greece on down through the Roman Empire, but also by how familiar the functions of these tales will feel.

In short, to paraphrase Graham Anderson, the preeminent scholar on fairy tale in the ancient world, there can be no doubt that early analogues of modern fairy tales existed in the ancient world, “whatever their context” (2019b: 32), ranging from China and India through the ancient Near East and Europe. The cultural history of the fairy tale is a long-standing one indeed, and a look at tales from antiquity demonstrates that the basic functions of these tales, too, have remained recognizable across the ages.



## CHAPTER ONE

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# Forms of the Marvelous

### *Prodigies and Wonders in Antiquity*

GRAHAM ANDERSON

When Greek or Roman writers envisage “the marvelous” what do they see? Do they expect a certain genre or genres of writing? How does their vision relate to the concept of fantasy? Is it confined to mere imagination or invention, or do they see the marvelous as part of the real or natural world as well? What kind of phenomena most readily qualify as marvelous—magical performances, miraculous healings, and the like? Fairy tales and myths? Should we look in any specific quarter of the world, or expect the marvelous wherever we find it? How is the marvelous most readily transmitted? Is romance as a genre the natural home of marvel? Is there an overall suspicion that anything claimed as marvelous does not belong to the world as we know it? These and similar questions can help us to form our expectations of what there is to find. From their earliest writings in the eighth century BCE and then across various literary genres down the centuries, the Greeks and Romans evinced a fascination with the marvelous. The literary evidence they left behind helps us answer many of these questions.

### TOWARD A DEFINITION

A good notion of the ancient world’s sense of the marvelous is offered in Pliny the Elder’s encyclopedic work *Naturalis historia* (NH, “Natural History,” first century CE): the *prodigiosa et incredibilia* (“amazing and incredible things”) listed include subjects as diverse as peacocks, the skin of tigers and panthers,

the infinite variety of human features, man-eating Cyclopes and one-eyed Arimaspi, and tribes immune from snakebites (*NH* 7.2).<sup>1</sup> A key notion is that “the marvelous” has a strong element of the extraordinary about it, and that it has a wide spread of connotations. A person such as a holy man, hero, or magician may be *thaumastos* (“amazing,” sometimes ironically); so, on the other hand, might a royal palace or a magic object be a *thauma idesthai*, “a wonder to behold.”<sup>2</sup> Usually a *thauma* is something we approve, so we do not expect it to have negative connotations such as the sinister or the grotesque. Nonetheless, in the *Odyssey* we find Polyphemus the Cyclops described as a *thauma*, a marvel or wonder (*Od.* 9.190), when we might have expected a more disapproving term—because, perhaps strangely to our view, the description refers to his giant stature rather than to his single eye, which is not accorded the same degree of attention. Although the term can be used of bogus marvels such as jugglers’ entertainments, sophistic tricks, and the like—a *thaumatopoios* (“wonder-worker,” “miracle-monger”) is more likely to be a charlatan than a genuine miracle worker—a *thauma* is most usually outside the natural order of things, and thus evokes a sense of wonder. The Greek and Latin terms for wonders are fairly flexible: we find collections titled *peri thaumasiōn* (“on wonders”), *apista* (“unbelievable things”), *paradoxa* (“surprising things”), and *mirabilia* (“amazing/marvelous things”).

## GENRES OF THE MARVELOUS: EPIC AND OLD COMEDY

While the marvelous may manifest itself in any context, it is useful to note the kinds of literary form where it seems most naturally to belong, and where it can expect to be incorporated in narrative situations. At first sight, epic might seem to support the marvelous only occasionally. Starting with Homeric epic (c. 700 BCE), in the *Iliad* we find the Greek warrior Achilles’ horse Xanthus speaking with a human voice (*Il.* 19.405–17), or amazing details of the god Hephaestus’s workmanship in the goddess Hera’s palace (*Od.* 14.166–9). The *Odyssey*, by contrast, supplies a ready stream of marvels: Odysseus duly impresses the Phaeacian king and his court with tales of a one-eyed giant and a witch who turns men into swine—to say nothing of the elaborate details of King Alcinous’s palace itself with its extraordinary garden. It is not just the details themselves that contribute a sense of wonder but also their placement in a remote part of the earth, the island of Scheria (Phaeacia) being reachable only by apparently magic ships, which can evidently steer themselves, as discussed below.

Later epic keeps the marvelous materials coming. Apollonius’s *Argonautica* (third century BCE)—the earliest literary version of Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece—offers us a crew with a range of marvelous powers and skills, including the extraordinary power of song, extraordinary vision, and

prophetic skill (Orpheus, Lynceus, and Mopsus, respectively); the crew use these attributes in succession to accomplish the dangerous tasks set by the villainous usurper Aeetes for the heroes sent to recover the Golden Fleece. Behind the plot lies a version of the international tale *Six Go round the Whole World*, where the number of experts who assist the hero is normally kept to the manageable minimum of its title (ATU 513A). Other genres, such as satire, lay claim to the marvelous as a central plot element. For instance, the Greek comic playwright Aristophanes' *Birds* (414 BCE) describes the foundation of a fantastic city, *Nephelokokkugia* ("Cloudcuckooland"), engineered by birds. And while "marvelous" may not be the ideal term for the gigantic dung beetle that carries the protagonist Trygaeus aloft in *Peace* (421 BCE), the effect is no less striking. The marvelous elements in Aristophanes' plays offer the possibility of using the fantastical as a cloak for satire of human communities on earth.

## GENRES OF THE MARVELOUS: PARADOXOGRAPHY

One distinctive form has emerged where the marvelous is unquestionably the chief component. From the third-century BCE lyric poet Callimachus through to late antiquity we find catalogs of wonders, some complete and others in extract.<sup>3</sup> Such catalogs comprise a genre known as "paradoxography," or "the recording of surprising events." The only real criterion for inclusion is sensational effect intended to provide entertainment for the general reader. Topics in paradoxography can include unusual births (such as jackal-headed babies), finds of gigantic bones, extraordinarily long-lived men, and any other curious facts that might appeal to the reader as beyond ordinary experience.

Particularly notable is a treatment in Phlegon of Tralles's compilation *Peri thaumasiōn* ("On Wonders," second century CE, often referred to by its Latin title *Mirabilia*): he describes a mummified centaur preserved in the emperor's storeroom (*Peri thaumasiōn* 34).<sup>4</sup> Occasionally the material is long enough to sustain a detailed narrative, as in Phlegon's tale of Philinnion, a maiden who returns from the dead to take a lover (*Mir.* 1.1–18). The materials in these collections tend to be arranged thematically (e.g., unusual births may be grouped together) or purely randomly. In addition to paradoxography itself we note that such material may form a ready resource for the miscellanist who wishes to collect a wider range of materials than simply wonders, but incorporates the latter nonetheless. For example, the Roman rhetorician Aelian's *Varia historia* (VH, "Historical Patchwork," second/third century CE), a collected miscellany that includes natural oddities, finds room for an account of the lavish lifestyle of Smindyrides of Sybaris, who could not sleep on a bed of rose petals because it gave him blisters, and who traveled with a retinue of a thousand cooks (VH 9.24, 12.24).<sup>5</sup> Aelian also describes the mad delusions of Thrasyllus of Aexone,

who imagined he owned all the ships that docked at Piraeus (VH 4.25), while the Roman writer Aulus Gellius, in his miscellany *Noctes atticae* (NA, “Attic Nights,” second century CE) quotes Aristotle and others on the maximum number of births a woman can have at any one time—five (NA 10.2).

The *paradoxa* are variously listed in miscellanists and paradoxographers themselves. Aulus Gellius’s examples include unusual peoples, such as the one-eyed Arimaspi, the *Cynocephaloi* (dog-headed men), and much else in the same vein.<sup>6</sup> Long before Gellius, the Greek physician and historian Ctesias (fifth century BCE), in his *Indica* (a description of India), had mentioned many unusual peoples and creatures, including the *Skiapodes* (“Shadow-feet”), who had only one large foot, which they used to shade themselves; *Ōtoliknoi* (“Winnowfan ears”), who had huge ears; and the manticore, which had the body of a lion and head of a man. In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle duly attempted an explanation of such physiological diversity, positing cross-breeding in hostile environments. The Greek geographer Strabo (c. 64 BCE–24 CE) singled out two authors, Deimachus and Megasthenes, who in the fourth and third centuries BCE (respectively) wrote of the marvels of India, describing men with ears large enough to sleep in, men with no mouths, men without noses, men with backwards fingers, and such like (Figure 1.1).<sup>7</sup>



FIGURE 1.1: Illustrations of “monstrous” humans. Illustrated manuscript, France, thirteenth century. Photo by D. Felton.

The Elder Pliny's catalogs of wonders, mentioned above, are among the most compendious (*NH* 7.21–32), while both the Elder and Younger Plinys treat the same story of the tame dolphin as paradoxical as any.<sup>8</sup> Some paradoxography is clearly erotic in flavor: consider Plato's myth of the origins of sexual anatomy and Achilles Tatius's amorous palm-trees,<sup>9</sup> or the seductive vine-women and the sex lives of the moon-people in the satirist Lucian's *Verae historiae* (*Ver. hist.*, "True Histories," second century CE). Such episodes are seldom far from the comic, especially Lucian's diverse means of sexual activity on the moon, where people change gender function in their twenties, or reproduce by means of a penis-tree (*Ver. hist.* 1.8, 1.22). The erotic in paradoxography thus sometimes tends toward satirical and allegorical elements.

### REACHING THE MARVELOUS: THE VOYAGE NARRATIVE

One motif accounts for a high proportion of marvel-related material: the traveler's wonder-tale. The three well-known examples mentioned above, Homer's *Odyssey*, Apollonius of Rhodes's *Argonautica*, and Lucian's *Verae historiae*, demonstrate the variety of possibilities. The voyager sets out on his journey, and in unknown, often hostile regions finds what is new and wonderful. In the land of the Phaeacians Odysseus encounters a people on the edge of the world who sail on what appear to be magic ships, as they know of their own accord where their sailors want them to go:

For the Phaeacians have neither helmsmen  
nor any sort of rudder or oars, as other ships have.  
Rather, their ships themselves understand the thoughts and intentions of men.  
and they know the cities and fertile fields of all peoples,  
and they cross swiftly over the deep sea,  
concealed by mist and cloud.

(*Od.* 8.557–62)

Earlier in the story, Odysseus had encountered more than one type of man-eating giant (the Cyclopes, the Laestrygonians) and even crossed the threshold between the living and the dead, under the instruction of the witch Circe, from whose magic potion he had rescued his crew.

Apollonius's Argonauts offer unique individual skills, as discussed above; moreover, his *Argonautica* prominently features witchcraft in the person of King Aetes' daughter Medea. The Argonauts have a specific quest: to retrieve the Golden Fleece from the land of Colchis, which they can do only after facing a number of marvelous obstacles, including the half-bird, half-woman Harpies, and the Clashing Rocks. And Jason himself must accomplish



seemingly impossible tasks, such as facing an army of “sown men” sprung from dragon’s teeth planted in the ground. Colchis, on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, is, like the Phaeacian Scheria, at the far edge of the known world. Lucian, for his part, trumps such puny feats: in the *Verae historiae* his crew make a voyage to the moon; are swallowed by a whale, ship and all (ATU 1889G);<sup>10</sup> and even reach the mythological Isle of the Blest. Minor adventures along the way draw heavily on the resources of paradoxography, with the satirical aspects bolstered by the facetious motivation of mere curiosity rather than the desire for tasks appropriate to a heroic age. Odysseus and Jason both eventually return home, while Lucian gives us testimony from no less than Homer (now living on the Island of the Blest) that “having seen everything, Lucian returned to his native land” (*Ver. hist.* 2.28)! The overall tradition of the wonder voyage had already appeared as early as the Egyptian *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, dating to the Middle Kingdom period (c. 2050–1710 BCE), where the abundance on the island of Kaa looks toward the utopian movement noted below, and the tradition continued with the tale of Sinbad the Sailor, incorporated by Antoine Galland into *The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Near Eastern folktales compiled during the Islamic golden age (eighth to fourteenth centuries CE), which was translated and adapted by Galland in the early eighteenth century.

## EXOTIC LOCATION: UTOPIAS AND THE MARVELOUS

Exotic and distant locations are the natural place for wonders, because they are normally difficult to verify and can be comfortably situated at the goal of a traveler’s tale.<sup>11</sup> The first utopian marvels in ancient literature are perhaps only modestly marvelous: Homer describes the palace of Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, with its brazen walls, sumptuous gold and silver interiors, miraculous gold and silver guard dogs, and magical servants; he also has a marvelous orchard, with a continuous supply of fruits and vines (*Od.* 7.81–132).

By the fifth century CE we find the proverbial *Nephelokokkygia* in Aristophanes’ *Birds*, with a nonsense account of its actual construction, listing the contributions of individual species of birds. Everything can be invented, but what is actually going to hold the city aloft? A similar absurdity appears in the folk anecdotes contained in the anonymous *Aesop Romance* (116), where a structure is to be built in mid-air, and boys on low-flying birds call for the building materials. Plato defines the whole business with his tale of the lost utopian city of Atlantis (*Timaeus* 24d–25d), but the Greek historian Theopompus (fourth century BCE) also purveys the notion of two cities, one utopian, the other dystopian, to which we should add the mythographer Euhemerus’s paradisiacal island Panchaea (fourth/third century BCE) and many others.<sup>12</sup> We might be

tempted to ask what is utopian about Cloudcuckooland; the absence of earthly officialdom is one obvious advantage. Atlantis can claim the amazing prosperity of its natural resources, lost in a single catastrophe. The legend of Panchaea, meanwhile, survived down the centuries; the Roman poet Vergil remarks on its fertility and “incense-bearing sands” (*Georgics* 2.139).

## FANTASY, IMAGINATION, AND THE MARVELOUS

Aside from generic connections, the marvelous overlaps with but does not fully equate with fantasy, the invention of the impossible or the improbable. Examples of fantasy in antiquity include such themes as celestial flights but can also accommodate such oddities as a man with three heads, six hands, and other features to match (Lucian, *Hermotimus* 74). Apollonius of Tyana praises *phantasia* (“creative imagination”), which extends known materials into a confident handling of the unknown, and even a means of portraying the gods themselves.<sup>13</sup> Lucian can envisage the layout of heaven with a reception service for prayers, sacrifices, oaths, and the like (*Icaromenippus* 25–6). Not all the materials of mere imagination will amount to “the marvelous,” but some undoubtedly will, as when Lucian and his crew discover a river of wine, whose fish duly intoxicate them (*Ver. hist.* 1.7), or sail their ship on top of a forest canopy like a land-yacht (*Ver. hist.* 2.42). Much of the material draws its effect from sheer exaggeration and parody, but also the clever mixture of the logically routine and the absurd. Some ingredients probably reflect the continued discovery of the real world,<sup>14</sup> first with the East Mediterranean, whether Crete or Phoenicia, but later, following the conquests of Alexander the Great, the perpetual fascination with the wonders of India (see Romm 1992: 82–120). The topic of the lost island of Atlantis has a legendary quality but also squares with expanding modern knowledge of the behavior of tsunamis and similar events in a geologically unstable, earthquake-prone region.

The relationship between fantasy and dreams also readily accommodates the marvelous. In Lucian’s *Navigium* (“The Ship”), Adimantus daydreams a ship loaded with gold (18), his friend Samippus dreams of campaigns more impressive than those of Alexander (28), and their ambitious competitor Timolaus dreams of magical sources of power to give him the status of a god (42–4). The poet Horace whimsically imagines himself turning into a bird (*Ode* 2.20, first century CE).

## MYTH AND THE MARVELOUS

Myth offers perhaps the most comprehensive repertoire of marvelous events. A recurrent theme in Greek myth is the interaction between the living and the dead, enabling contact with the other world. Odysseus meets many old

acquaintances in the underworld, and the ability to do so persists as a theme to the end of antiquity. It forms the basis of the genre of sepulchral epigram, which allows the buried dead to communicate with the passerby through the message inscribed on his tombstone.<sup>15</sup> The rhetorical figure known as *eidōlopoiia* (“image-making”) extends the scope for messages to be passed on to Homer or some other deceased person as if they are actually still present.<sup>16</sup>

In the centuries after Homer, the underworld becomes a livelier, less lugubrious place, one where tragic poets can extend their style wars from the world above, as in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (405 BCE), which presents a contest in the underworld between Aeschylus and Euripides for “Best Tragic Poet.” Roman satire develops the topic still further: Ulysses must take the seer Tiresias’s advice to become a legacy-hunter if he wants to survive the depredations of the suitors that have occurred during his long absence from Ithaca (Horace, *Satire* 2.5). Prose dialogue as a miniature genre can go further still. Lucian, in his *Dialogues of the Dead*, puts Alexander the Great and Hannibal at odds in the world below, where Alexander wins his claim to be the best general (25). Communications can just as readily be opened with the Olympians. Aristophanes sends Trygaeus aloft to try to obtain Peace in the eponymous comic play (*Peace* 180–95), while a Roman twist attributed to Seneca the Younger has the newly deceased emperor Claudius expecting deification, only to be put on trial in heaven, convicted of his crimes, and sent down to Hades, where he meets the ghosts of colleagues whose executions he had ordered (*Apocolocyntosis*, first century CE).

A *pièce de résistance* of mythical imagination appears in the Roman poet Ovid’s description of the Cave of Sleep (*Metamorphoses* 11.592–649, 8 CE), with the whole staff of allegorical figures, such as Morpheus, tasked with forming deceitful images. Lucian’s description of an Island of Dreams shows a similar development (*Ver. hist.* 2.32–5). The second-century CE orator Aelius Aristides records grandiose dreams, such as that he will share a tomb with Alexander the Great, no less (*Orationes* 50.48f.). His contemporary Lucian can claim to have dreamt of a trip aloft in a chariot with *Paideia* (“Education”) herself (*Somnium* 15). While we could argue that dreams are routinely exotic and therefore not actually “marvelous,” the examples here clearly carry the exotic to fantastical extremes.

The mythical can be allied to the marvelous in such details as descriptions of heaven. In *Iliad* 14.166–9 we receive a privileged glimpse of the smith-god Hephaestus’s workmanship in providing Hera’s bathing arrangements. When he brings Menippus up to heaven, Lucian mentions the golden thrones on which Zeus sits to receive prayers and sacrifices (*Icaromenippus* 25). Similarly, when the heroes are feasting on the Island of the Blest, Lucian describes luxurious banqueting arrangements, including clouds of dew over the tables, cups that fill themselves with wine, and the like (*Ver. hist.* 2.14).

Back on earth itself we can note the oft-repeated tableau of Zeus's abduction of the mortal maiden Europa from Phoenicia to Crete in the guise of a bull, following the celebrated version in the second-century BCE poet Moschus's *Europa*. Two key elements in the poem provide the décor of the marvelous: the nuptial procession including Tritons, sea-nymphs, and the sea god Poseidon in person; then the spectacle (*theama*) of Europa herself, with the wind billowing and her sash acting as a sail (Figure 1.2).

Imitations of Moschus can add their own embellishments, such as a very diaphanous Europa in the suggestive ecphrasis by Achilles Tatius, detailing Europa's riding side-saddle on Zeus in his bull disguise (*Europa* 1.1). The mythological repertoire shows a fascination for hybrid creatures, including the Minotaur, the Chimaera, the Sphinx, and the Hydra, among many others. These amazing forms often emerge to provide victorious single combats for individual heroes.<sup>17</sup> More numerous are the hybrid centaurs and satyrs.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the monsters there is often a quirk, such as that they can be killed only in some special way: Heracles' first labor, the Nemean lion, can be killed only by its own claws; the Gorgon Medusa only by a hero looking at her monstrous reflection rather than directly at her; and so on.

Scientifically related wonders are a source of speculation. In his didactic epic poem *De rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things," c. 50 BCE), Lucretius envisages the earth giving rise to creatures with no feet, or no mouths, or no

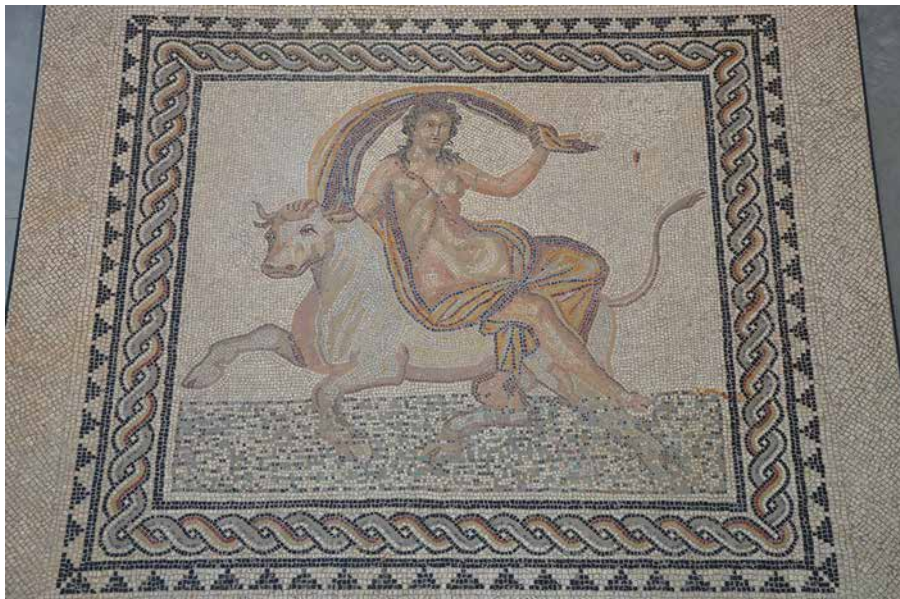


FIGURE 1.2: Zeus in the form of a bull, kidnapping Europa. Roman mosaic, late second to early third century CE. Public domain.

eyes (5.840–4). Phlegon and other paradoxographers offer entire collections of such oddities. Certainly, such collections could be seen as assemblages of curious *facts* rather than outputs of the imagination as such; as noted above, Phlegon mentions the remains of a centaur brought to Rome after dying in captivity in Egypt (*Peri thaumasiōn* 34). To such a collection one might add the Indian mantichore, which combined the body of a lion, head of a man, and poisonous spines on its tail resembling those of a porcupine (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* [VA] 3.45).

Apart from the monstrous and the hybrid, the animal world can offer familiar and normal creatures marvelously endowed with human speech, such as Achilles' horse Xanthus (e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 19.408–17). On the whole, the power of speech is not regarded as wonderful but rather as a convention of fable as a genre. Yet there are instances where rhetorical elaboration can make for extraordinarily eloquent animals such as Achilles Tatius's gnat, replete with sophistic eloquence before falling victim to a spider (2.22); or Plutarch's Gryllus ("grunter"), a man whom Circe turned into a pig, who makes the case to an amazed Odysseus that animals like his now-porcine self are actually superior to humans.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, we have a general notion that the world is animate and that animals can think more or less in a human way. Plants and objects can also be given a voice, like the sympathetic reed and tower that give Psyche advice in Apuleius's "Cupid and Psyche" (*Metamorphoses* 6.12, 6.17).

Some aspects of the marvelous can be presented as technological wonders. Ovid provides a full-blown ecphrasis when Phaethon sees the palace of the sun god, enriched by the artistry of the god Vulcan, including the likenesses of marine deities, as well as depictions of the cities, men, and all the signs of the zodiac (*Met.* 2.1–18). Phaethon sees his father the sun god presiding over all the allegories of time, from days to seasons to the year itself, and is dazzled by the sight. One of the most marvelous man-made wonders may be the wings Daedalus fashions for his son Icarus and himself to accomplish their escape from the Cretan Labyrinth, resulting in an astonished reaction from the farmer who sees them flying away: he mistakes them for gods (*Met.* 8.188–20).

## METAMORPHOSIS AND THE MARVELOUS

In general metamorphosis seems to fascinate over a wide range of ancient literature focusing on the ability of creatures to change shape into others either up or down the evolutionary scale.<sup>20</sup> Up to a point there is observable science here: a chrysalis clearly changes into a butterfly, and the result is necessarily marvelous (Ovid, *Met.* 15.372–4). Sometimes, as in the case of certain marine creatures, there seems to be a set repertoire of changes, which may include transformations into elements such as fire and water as well as into material objects like a lion or tree, as with the sea-deities Thetis and Proteus who,



when caught and interrogated by mortals, shape-shift in an attempt to escape. Sometimes there are mistaken inferences, as when men are wiped out and frogs proliferate, plausibly leading to the false conclusion that men have turned into frogs. In some cases, it seems more difficult to see the point of a metamorphosis. In the story of Circe in *Odyssey* 10, for example, we are not explicitly told *why* she changes men into animals such as wolves, lions, and pigs (Figure 1.3), an ambiguity allowing for multiple interpretations.<sup>21</sup>

Sex change features occasionally, as in Ovid's story of Caenis, who opts to change from female to male after being raped by Poseidon; hyenas, too, supposedly can change sex (*Met.* 15.408–10). Phlegon seems to point to genuinely observed instances of hermaphroditism (*Peri thaumasiōn* 5–9),<sup>22</sup> while Lucian parodies such phenomena by having moon-people change sexual function (though not their actual sex) at age twenty-five (*Ver. hist.* 1.22)! Part of the wonder-aspect of metamorphosis seems in Ovid's hands to be in the itemized process of changes, often executed with a wry humor, and he has particular fun with the pirates amazed at their own changes when Bacchus turns them into dolphins: "Medon was the first whose body began to turn dark, as his spine bent into a prominent arch. Lycabas started to ask him 'what amazing creature (*miracula*) are you turning into?', but as he was still speaking his jaws widened, his nose hooked, and his skin hardened and became scaled" (*Met.* 3.671–5).

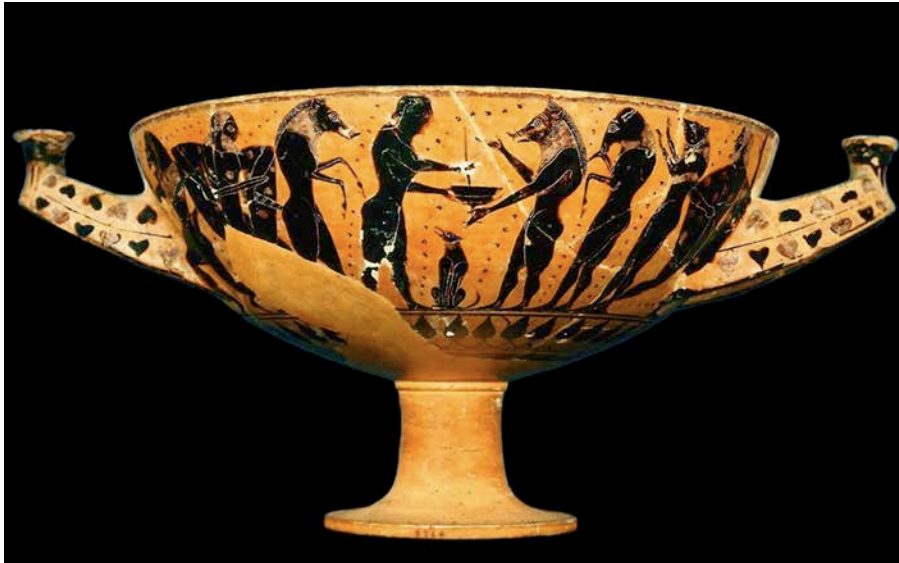


FIGURE 1.3: Circe enchanting Odysseus's men. Greek wine-cup, c. 560–550 BCE. By the Painter of the Boston Polyphemos. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Public domain.

Sometimes metamorphoses have an air of the scientific about them, as in Ovid's regeneration of life after the flood where heat and moisture combine to produce life, and half-formed creatures can be observed still developing in the earth (*Met.* 1.426–37). The extensive speech of Pythagoras reiterates this and amplifies the examples: not only does a rotting carcass of bulls produce bees, but a buried warhorse will produce hornets (*Met.* 15.69–478; cf. Virgil, *Georgics* 4.284).<sup>23</sup>

## MAGIC AND THE MARVELOUS

Magic was widely practiced in the ancient world to bypass the divine world order, often by enlisting the help of underworld powers to support the practitioner with correctly performed rituals. Displays of wonders are a natural by-product, if not always the main purpose of magical practice. Apuleius gives an example of the powers of an individual sorceress: she can turn a business competitor into a frog, delay a woman's pregnancy, and shift an entire community from one place to another, among other things (*Met.* 1.8–10). A classic of wonder-narrative is the folktale type known as "Apprentice and Ghost" (ATU 325\*), which appears as early as the second century CE in the works of Lucian, who presents the version recognizable as "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (*Philopseudes* 33–6). An Egyptian holy man Pancrates ("All-powerful") magically animates domestic implements so that they can perform the household chores. The plan misfires when the apprentice imitates his master's spell to initiate the magic, but is unable to reverse it—resulting in a flooded house and a furious Pancrates. Part of the satirical fun is to find this all-powerful wizard expending his ingenuity on such trivial domestic tasks. Another especially good example of magic and the marvelous is Lucian's haunted house story, in which a ghost is challenged by an exorcist and finally put to rest. Lucian's satirical twist has the ghost shape-shifting into various dangerous animals to terrify the exorcist, but yielding once he has been held fast throughout various transformations (*Philops.* 31). Another magical exhibition is even more tendentious: a Hyperborean wizard, who can fly through the air, summons a woman for a would-be lover:

He raised up Hecate while she brought up Cerberus, and he drew down Selene, a multiform wonder (*polymorphon theama*) who took on different appearances at different times: first she took the form of a woman, then she became a very fine bull, then appeared as a puppy. To end the Hyperborean moulded a tiny Cupid out of clay, and said, "go off and bring Chrysis." (*Philops.* 14)<sup>24</sup>

There is a strong element here of exhibition for its own sake and multiplication of "special effects": the practitioner of magic clearly wishes to dazzle his client with superfluous feats.

## HAGIOGRAPHY AND THE MIRACULOUS

The marvelous may also take the form of a spiritual or medical miracle. Apollonius of Tyana in the first century CE acquired a reputation for minor miracles including the ability to bilocate (VA 4.10), appearing in both Smyrna and Ephesus simultaneously. He also raises a girl from the dead (a *thauma* at VA 4.45). One of Lucian's "lovers of lies," Eucrates, mentions a statue of the Corinthian general Pellichus that was believed to have healing powers (*Philops.* 18–20). The priest of Isis similarly presides over the changing of Apuleius's anti-hero Lucius from an ass back into a man, with the acknowledgment of a whole theater audience as witnesses of the goddess's "striking wonder" (*insigni miraculo*, *Met.* 11.13–14). Or again, Apollonius exposes a demon who plans to devour his pupil Menippus under the pretext of a marriage, complete with an elaborate yet illusory wedding feast that disappears once Apollonius uncovers the deceit (VA 4.25). The demon is a Lamia—a female shape-shifting creature—planning to fatten Menippus before devouring him, and the story comprises an early version of "The Serpent Maiden" tale (ATU 507C), in which a serpent emerges out of a princess's mouth and tries to eat her groom.<sup>25</sup>

Exorcism is also seen as a marvelous or miraculous action in its own right, with the holy man controlling malign supernatural forces, as in Lucian's tale of the Babylonian snake charmer (*Philops.* 11–12). The seer Melampus of Greek myth can cure mad princesses, daughters of Proetus, from wandering wild; he will not perform the purification for a third of Proetus's kingdom, but will do so for two-thirds (Anderson 2000: 119). Philostratus describes an exorcism performed by Apollonius of Tyana: the sage drives a harmful spirit out of a sixteen-year-old boy (VA 3.38).

## THE MARVELOUS AND THE WONDERS OF INDIA: ACCORDING TO THE GREEKS AND ROMANS

One topic that surfaces repeatedly in classical literature is "the wonders of India," especially as associated with Alexander the Great. The so-called *Alexander Romance* (c. fourth century CE), a fictionalized account of Alexander's life, seemingly begins as something related to history, but is subject to interpolation and development, and consequently expands over time from the Hellenistic world to the medieval, with the marvels growing increasingly fantastical:<sup>26</sup> Alexander describes trees that grow till midday then shrink again, their drops protected by an invisible deity; or Alexander is lowered into the sea in a bathyscaphe, to have a narrow escape from a great fish (Figure 1.4).<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Alexander's cook discovers the Waters of Life by accident, but Alexander is unable to acquire them for himself and so remains mortal (*Alexander Romance* B 2.39, 2.41). He abandons his attempt to fly to heaven in a basket hauled by birds when a divine voice warns him to desist (B 2.41). Apart



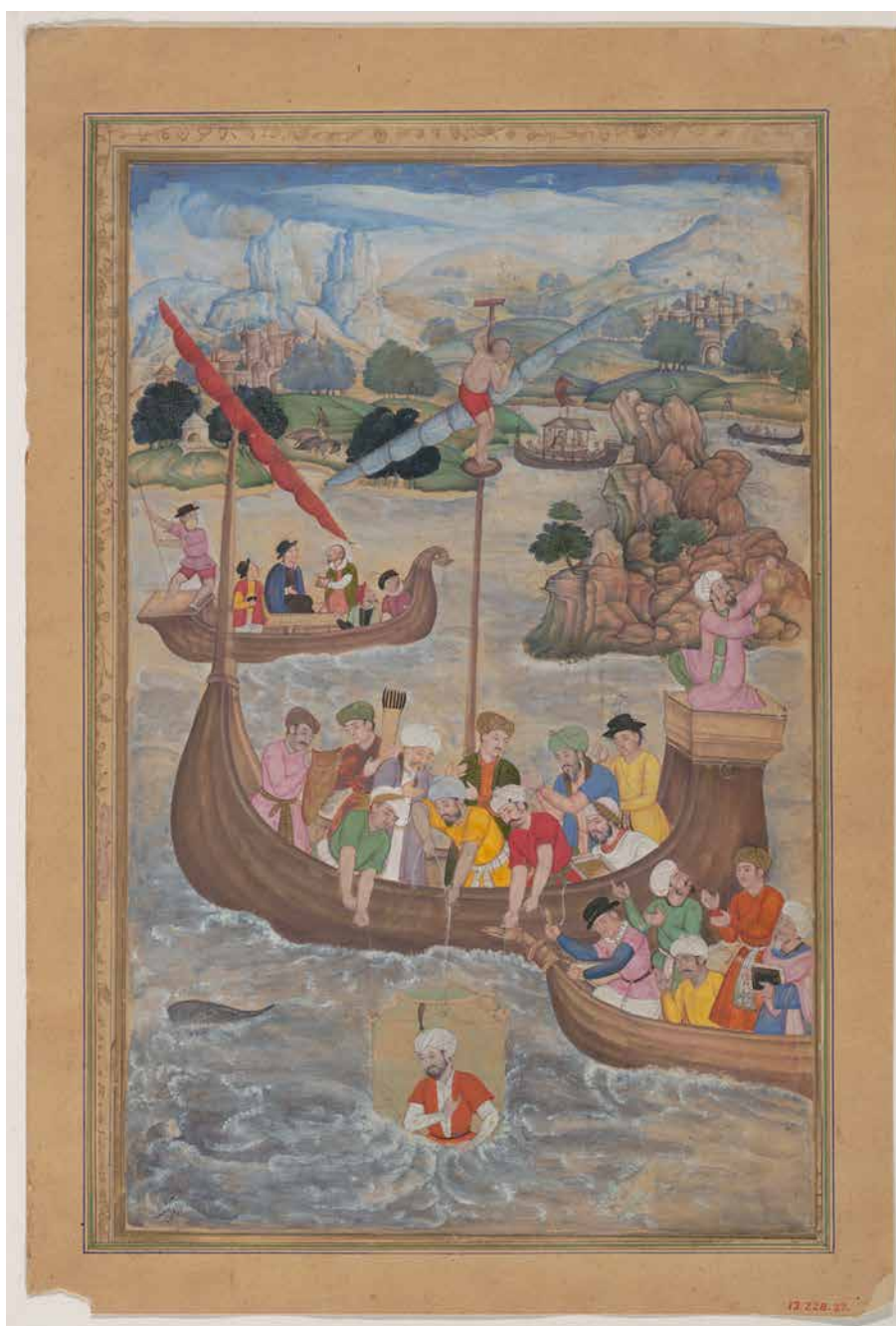


FIGURE 1.4: Alexander being lowered into the sea in a glass diving bell. Folio from a Khamsa (Quintet) illustrated manuscript of Indian poet Amir Khusrau Dihlavi Mukunda, 1597–8. Public domain.

from the *Alexander Romance* we have an independent range of wonders culled from writers of *Indica*, as mentioned above, and Philostratus incorporates a conversation between Apollonius and the Indian sages on the wonders of India, including the manticores, golden water, and the pantarbe stone that acts like a magnet, not to mention pygmies living underground, gold-digging griffins, and the Phoenix (VA 3.45–8).<sup>28</sup>

## THE MARVELOUS IN THE NEAR EAST

The marvelous in ancient literature is by no means confined to classical Greek and Roman literature, and the relatively few remnants of ancient Near Eastern literatures—themselves based on much earlier oral tradition—suggest a pattern of borrowing and adaptation. Sumerian literature from around the third millennium BCE onward houses many examples of animal fable, in which the fox enjoys a prominence similar to that in Greco-Roman literature (e.g., Kramer 1981: 124–31). Wonders such as celestial flight also appear: the Akkadian tales of Adapa and Etana testify to mortals who are able to find their way up to heaven. The exploits of the god Ninurta offer at least partial analogues to the exploits of the Greek Heracles. The quest of Gilgamesh for eternal life presents a wonder-plant analogous in function to the “waters of life” motif: the aspiring hero has it within his grasp, only to lose it again and so affirm mankind’s mortality.<sup>29</sup>

Egyptian literature enjoys a separate identity. The *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, mentioned above, describes an encounter in the Indian Ocean between a shipwrecked sailor and a benign serpent, thirty cubits long and covered in gold, on the island of Kaa. This utopian island provides the sailor with wonderful gifts, but the serpent tempers the sailor’s enthusiasm by noting that once the sailor leaves the island he will never be able to return to it, because it will disappear (Atlantis-like) beneath the waves, never to be rediscovered.<sup>30</sup> And the Westcar Papyrus, another ancient Egyptian text, provides five tales of wonder-workers performing magic before the pharaoh. These include a tale of how the wife of the king’s priest Ubainer is caught in adultery with a villager, and the priest gets his revenge by fashioning a wax crocodile that he magically animates, causing it to trap his wife’s lover.<sup>31</sup>

## THE MARVELOUS IN INTERNATIONAL FOLKTALE

The repertoire of international tales finds scope for a number of marvelous features, especially tales of “the Dragon-Slayer” type (ATU 300), where a hero has to accomplish a number of seemingly impossible tasks, culminating in slaying a monster (usually to rescue a princess) and requires special weapons or techniques, typically supplied by supernatural means.<sup>32</sup> Perseus offers a good

example, with a shield supplied by Athena acting as a mirror via which he can sever the Gorgon Medusa's head without looking directly at it, and a sword and winged sandals supplied by Hermes, which enable the hero to deal with the sea-monster threatening the princess Andromeda (see Hansen 2002: 119–230).

The marvelous in folk and fairy tale need not be confined to wondrous weapons.<sup>33</sup> It can also include the extraordinary natural powers of some of the Argonauts, such as the superhuman strength of Heracles, or the amazing sight of Lynceus, a Greek prince whose vision was so acute that he was said to be able to see for miles, and who consequently served as the lookout on the ship *Argo* during Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. The marvelous can also reside in a magic object, possession of which guarantees power to the owner. Plato cites as an example the story of Gyges, a shepherd who becomes king of Lydia thanks to falling into a chasm where, from a gigantic corpse, he removes a ring that can make the wearer invisible, and which enables him to seduce the queen and acquire the crown (*Republic* 359d–60b). Most intriguing is Plato's incidental hint that there were more wonders (*thaumasta*) where the ring came from. The story calls to mind that of Aladdin or similar tales of wondrous objects from the later *Thousand and One Nights*. Other magical objects might include the Golden Fleece itself, which is presented as an extraordinary marvel but does not actually *do* anything in and of itself, aside from having come from a ram with the ability to fly. Or the marvelous can take the form of an amazing effect, as when Epimenides of Crete falls asleep in a cave only to wake after fifty-seven years, thinking he had taken only a short nap—a precursor for Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle."<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes it may be hard to focus on what precisely is marvelous about a tale. In the case of the Cyclops Polyphemus we are clearly dealing with a wonder-tale, and yet Odysseus has no special resource other than his native wit. The size and brute strength of the Cyclops might be considered amazing, but the means of defeating the cannibal giant is ordinary enough (Odysseus and his men get the Cyclops drunk). Sometimes the fabulous beauty of the heroine of a tale can be expressed as a source of wonder in itself: Chione has a thousand suitors (Ovid, *Met.* 11.301–2), and Apuleius's Psyche is so beautiful that people consider her another Venus, as discussed below.

Among tales focusing on a persecuted heroine, again a magic object (or equivalent) can be central, as in this early Greek variant on "Cinderella" (ATU 510A) concerning the courtesan Rhodopis ("rose-eyed"), set in Egypt:

People tell the story (*mutheuouisi*) that when Rhodopis was bathing, an eagle, snatching one of her sandals from her maidservant, carried it to Memphis. There, while the king was administering judgment outdoors, the eagle, positioning itself above the king's head, dropped the sandal right into his lap. And he, affected by both the pleasing shape of the sandal and by the

surprising event (*paradoxon*), sent men throughout the country to seek its owner. When she was found in the city of Naucratis, she was brought up to Memphis and became wife of the king.

(Strabo, *Geographica* 17.1.33; see also Hansen 2002: 85–9)

## THE MARVELOUS IN THE ROMANCES

Prose fiction in antiquity—a genre referred to typically as “the ancient novel” or “Greek romance novel”—generally entails a stereotyped plot about the separation and reunion of lovers, while the individual novelist can decide whether there are to be exhibitions of the marvelous in the plot or not. In the Greek novels of Chariton and of Xenophon of Ephesus there is little of marvel, but those of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus (third/fourth century CE) contain wonders a-plenty, integrated into the plot in varying degrees. The most conspicuous is Achilles Tatius’s list of erotic plants, animals, and even minerals, all of which resemble the catalogs of paradoxography, and which accord well with the exotic wanderings of the hero Clitophon and his love Leucippe, as here: “At any rate the lodestone (*magnēsia*) is amorous towards iron; and if it only sees and touches iron, it attracts it to itself, as if by some erotic force within; is not this the kiss of a loving stone and its beloved iron?” (1.17). But many other materials are similar. The narrator’s reaction to the city of Alexandria in Achilles Tatius’s novel stands out as an expression of wide-eyed wonder:

I was an insatiable spectator, and was unable to take in all its beauty. Some parts I saw, others I was about to see; some parts I pressed on to see, others I was reluctant to pass by. What I saw overpowered my vision, while what I expected to see dragged me on. And so dragging myself into every street and feeling weary like someone unsatisfied in love, I exclaimed “Eyes, we have been overcome!”

(5.1)

He could not decide which was greater: the city’s size or its beauty. A similar sense of wonder is implied by Achilles Tatius’s description of the Phoenix and several sensuous descriptions of mythical paintings, including the story of the woodland god Pan and the nymph Syrinx (8.6). In his *Aethiopica*, Heliodorus seems less inclined to flamboyant ecphrasis for its own sake, but describes a stone that fireproofs the heroine (8.9–11). On the fringes of Greek romance stand works where paradoxography is more central, such as Antonius Diogenes’ *Marvels beyond Thoule* and its suspected parody, Lucian’s *Verae historiae*.<sup>35</sup> The *apista* Diogenes describes are unfortunately cryptic:

This is the route on which (Deinias) saw the wonders beyond Thule ... He says he saw what experts on astronomy say, such as that it is possible for some to live at the North pole, and that the night lasts a month, or more or less; and that a night lasts six months, and at longest a night lasts a year; not only that the night lasts so long, but the same thing happens to the days ... And most incredible of all, that travelling north to the vicinity of the moon, it was the shiniest of lands, and that they saw there what someone might expect to see who had put together such an exaggerated account.

(110b–111a)

In Lucian's *Verae historiae* we find a whole episode set on the moon, complete with a telescopic device for spying on people on the earth below, and in general a texture that calls to mind the story of the fictional Baron Munchausen, with wonders following each other thick and fast.<sup>36</sup> The *Alexander Romance* finds room for Alexander's observation of wonders, often strung together as randomly as in the paradoxographers. Other wonders are strategically placed: Alexander in India is shown a sacred grove containing two trees, one male, one female, sacred to the sun and moon, respectively. Each of these trees is able to speak with a human voice—but they prophesy the doom of Alexander (*Alexander Romance* 3.17).

## THE MARVELOUS IN “CUPID AND PSYCHE”

The marvelous in ancient fairy tale is most evident in “Cupid and Psyche,” the earliest known variant of ATU 425 (“The Search for the Lost Husband”). This story appears as an inset that forms the centerpiece of Apuleius's comic novel *Metamorphoses*. Psyche, an astoundingly beautiful princess, incurs the wrath of Venus, and is consequently condemned to be the bride of a monster, who turns out to be an invisible but princely husband with an extraordinary palace. Her jealous sisters persuade her to break a taboo and gaze upon her husband, who is actually none other than the son of Venus, the god Cupid himself. When Psyche breaks the taboo, Cupid flies away, but Psyche wins redemption by performing seemingly impossible tasks with the unsolicited aid of natural helpers. Ultimately, Cupid's mother Venus relents and the gods endorse the marriage.

The tale is told as an *anilis fabula*, an “old wives’ tale,” literally: an old woman, in service to a band of robbers, tells the story to a girl they have taken hostage (Figure 1.5). She is still within the age range to hear it as a children's fairy tale, with recognizable components later found in “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” and “Snow White.”

The initial description of Psyche herself has a flavor of the marvelous: “And so many of the citizens and great crowds of visitors, at the report of this extraordinary sight (*eximii spectaculi*) gathered into an eager throng; they





FIGURE 1.5: Lucius in donkey form, listening to the old woman narrate “Cupid and Psyche.” Engraving, c. 1530–60. Public domain.

were dumbfounded in wonder at her amazing beauty” (Apul., *Met.* 4.28). The marvelous element also shows itself in the description of Cupid’s palace: no expense is spared in its elaborate decoration, and Psyche is waited upon by invisible servants and entertained by invisible musicians:

Immediately nectar-like wines and courses of various foods, without servitors but only driven by some breath, were set before her; nor could she see anyone, but she heard only the words that came forth, and her attendants had only voices .... someone entered and sang with an invisible voice, while someone else struck a cithara. He, too, was invisible. Then the harmonious sound of a choir reached her ears so that, although no-one could be seen, there was clearly an ensemble in evidence.

(Apul., *Met.* 5.3)

Psyche is not only magically provided for by Cupid’s palace. In her search for him she is also assisted by such magic helpers as compassionate ants, Jupiter’s

own eagle, a talking reed, and a talking tower, all serving as the “magic helpers” of fairy tale, and reinforcing the stereotype of the heroine as kind and obedient and accordingly enjoying the support of the natural world (Apul., *Met.* 6.10–17). In fact, the whole tale is suffused with amazing touches of empathy, as when the West Wind acts as transport for Psyche to Cupid’s palace, making sure he carries her as gently as possible (4.35), or when the steel blade the heroine is about to stab herself with shrinks from the crime by intentionally slipping from her hands (5.22).

## AVERSION TO THE MARVELOUS

For all the resilience of wonder tales we can also detect a contrary pressure: that wonders or the marvelous belongs to the realms of the impossible and should be avoided and belittled in the real world. In Petronius’s first-century CE *Satyrica* the marvelous anecdotes, such as Niceros’s werewolf story, are tied to the uneducated credulity of their tellers. The phrase *anilis fabula* itself, applied to Apuleius’s “Cupid and Psyche,” offers a dismissive attitude. And the *Odyssey* often seems to downplay wonder: the Cyclops and Laestrygonian episodes are presented as horrific rather than incredible, as if the storyteller wants to integrate the stories into a real world where they do not quite belong. It is useful to note Longinus’s verdict on Homer’s having taken leave of his senses when dealing with fantastic narrative (*De Sublimitate* [“On the Sublime”] 9.14),<sup>37</sup> and Lucian outright calls Homer, Ctesias, and other authors of marvels “liars” (*Ver. hist.* 1.3).

Also, an element of “wonder-management” surfaces from time to time. Lucian’s portrait of the bogus oracle-monger Alexander of Abonouteichos shows a counterbalance to the appetite for marvels that kept the oracle in business. Particularly noteworthy is how Lucian describes Alexander’s alleged first epiphany as the prophet of the new snake-god Glycon (Figure 1.6):

And at dawn he leapt practically naked into the market-place, only covering his parts with a loin-cloth (which was also gilded), carrying that dagger of his and at the same time tossing his loose head of hair like the devotees of the Mother Goddess in an ecstatic trance. He climbed up onto a high altar and gave an address, congratulating the city as about to receive the god’s manifestation this very day. Those present—for almost the whole city including women and the old and young alike had assembled together—were amazed and offered prayers and obeisance. But he voiced some meaningless sounds like Hebrew or Phoenician; he amazed them although they did not know what he was saying, except for this one thing, that he slipped in at every turn the names of Apollo and Asclepius.

(*Alexander the False Prophet* 13)

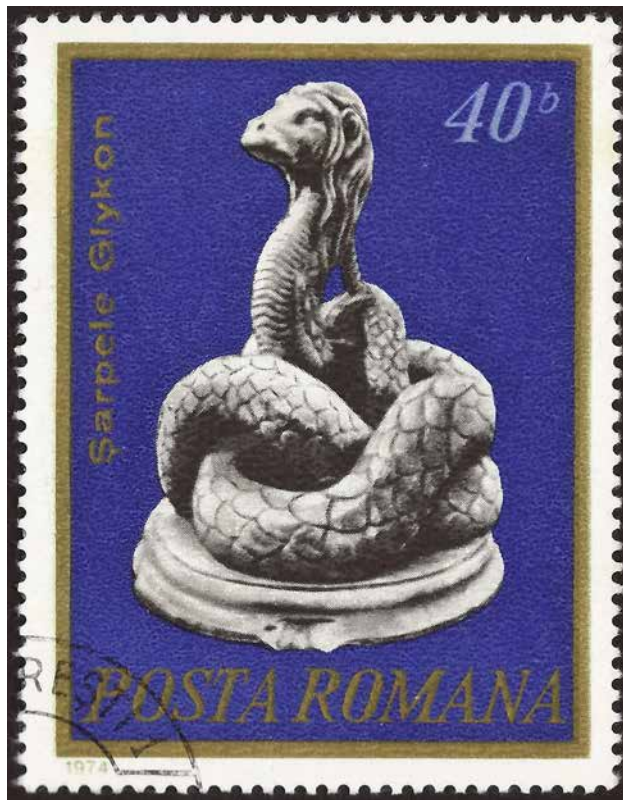


FIGURE 1.6: A 1974 postage stamp from Romania, commemorating the finding of a second-century CE Roman marble sculpture of a Glycon snake, unearthed in 1962 in the Romanian town of Constanta (ancient Tomi). Public domain.

Lucian's approach is twofold. He satirizes Alexander by emphasizing his calculated theatricality as well as the gullibility of his audience, all agog for marvels, even in the prophet's display of gibberish. At a more sophisticated level, the educated intellectuals in his *Philopseudeis* provide similar translation of conjurers' tricks into marvels, to the disgust of the narrator Tychiades, who systematically discredits such nonsense.

There is a revealing anecdote in Aulus Gellius. The author has visited a sale of *mirabilia*-type books at Brundisium, only to vent his disgust at the futility of such materials:

I saw there bundles of books laid out for sale, and at once I eagerly made for them. Now the lot of them were in Greek, but full of miracles and fabulous tales, things unheard of, unbelievable (*miraculorum fabularumque, res inauditae, incredulae*), and yet by ancient writers of no



small authority: Aristetas of Proconnesus, Isigonus of Nicea and Ctesias ... I was seized by distaste for such unsuitable writings, which have no relevance to the enrichment or improvement of life.

(*Noctes Atticae* 9.4.2–12)

Gellius is by temperament prone to rank hard fact above fiction: his legal career and philological bent go far to account for his attitude. Occasionally we find similar interplay between credulity and skepticism, as when Apollonius of Tyana asks an Indian sage about the manticore, the pantarbe stone, and similar wonders, calling such stories *apista*. He dismisses the most improbable details, and yet the Phoenix is still sufficiently entrenched in Indian and Egyptian lore to be considered acceptable (Philostr., *VA* 3.45–9)!

## RECOUNTING THE MARVELOUS TO CHILDREN

Today we readily associate the marvelous with stories for children, but this was not always the case. The earliest modern telling of “Sleeping Beauty” has the girl not kissed but raped by the prince. Similarly, in “Cupid and Psyche” we find what is clearly a forced marriage. Yet neither tale could be said to have lost its identity on that account. The ancient version of Cinderella where the girl had been a courtesan underlines an essentially adult approach to the tale. Later fairy tales such as those of Giambattista Basile in his *Lo cunto de li cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille* (*The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for Little Ones*, 1634–6) and the Brothers Grimm in their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*, 1812–64) can emphasize elements of extreme cruelty. For example, the first wife of the prince in Basile’s “Sun, Moon, and Talia” prepares to eat her husband’s children, while the Grimms’ ugly sisters mutilate their feet to fit Cinderella’s shoe, leaving bloody trails as they walk. Plato mentions tales told to children with disapproval or otherwise (*Resp.* 377b–c), but himself tells an Aladdin-like story of Gyges and his magic ring for moral purposes (359c–360d).

A work known as *Imagines* (“Likenesses”), attributed to various Philostrati,<sup>38</sup> describes dozens of artworks seen when Philostratus visited Naples. The author specifically aims his discourse toward the ten-year-old child of his host, because the boy asks for his interpretations of the sculptures and paintings in the house. Philostratus begins by asking “Have you recognized, boy, that this painting is based on Homer?” and then explicates the marvelous aspects of the work, such as Hephaestus setting a river on fire (*Imag.* 1.1). Myths involving children are an obvious draw, as in the scene of the centaur Chiron instructing Achilles (*Imag.* 2.2), the birth of Hermes (1.26), and Heracles in swaddling clothes (5). Similarly, Philostratus explicates a depiction of the Argo’s encounter with a sea-monster:

But now I think even Lynceus' eye is terror-struck at the sight of the phantom, which had made the fifty oarsmen break off their rowing as well. Of course Heracles is not put out at the sight, since he has met many like it, but the rest are calling it some sort of miracle. For they are looking at Glaucus, the sea-god ... And what a big arm he has, with all its exercise against the sea, always taking on the waves and smoothing them for his swimming. What a breast, spread over with a hairy covering of tangle and seaweed, while his belly below is changing and is already beginning to tail off: it is clear that the rest of Glaucus is a fish, from the tail raised and curling to his waist.

(*Imag.* 2.15)

## RECOUNTING THE MARVELOUS TO OLDER AUDIENCES

Children were hardly the principal audience for the marvelous. Moreover, the marvelous could expect to be enhanced by the act of effective presentation when intended for certain adult contexts. We have seen how a royal court may serve as an audience: the Egyptian Westcar Papyrus presents five miracle-tales told at the court of King Khufu by the pharaoh's own sons, while, later on, Scheherazade's tales in *The Thousand and One Nights* offer a similar framing device, when she uses storytelling as a way to stall for time, keeping the vengeful King Shahryar engaged in her cliff-hanging tales until he falls in love with her and spares her life. In an early Greek context, King Alcinous acknowledges Odysseus's skill as a narrator of increasingly fabulous tales, moving from a realistic raid on the Cicones' tribe in Thrace to the land of the Lotus Eaters to the Cyclopes and the rest, until he goes to Hades itself (*Od.* 11.362–9). We have a steady trickle of other storytellers whose fluency or skill enhances their material, perhaps most notably in the case of Niceros at the dinner of Trimalchio, where the raconteur is personally involved with the horrific nature of his material, and conditions the audience's response: "Everyone was seized by amazement. With all respect to your story, if you'll take my word for it, my hair really stood on end, because I know Niceros doesn't mess about in his stories: he's reliable and doesn't beat about the bush" (*Satyrica* 63). So too Apuleius presents the self-incriminating story of Thelyphron, naively brought out of his depth through his encounter with a witch while guarding a corpse (*Met.* 2.21–30), as well as the character Aristomenes' extended tale of two witches (*Met.* 1.12–19). Throughout these narratives the storyteller and his audience are increasingly introduced to the sinister aspects of magic: the witches here specialize in the removal of body parts.

Those engaged in wonder-narrative frequently trigger similar narratives in others. Niceros inspires Trimalchio himself to cap his predecessor's story with an experience of his own involving witches snatching away a child: a household

slave takes up arms against the witches and is beaten to death by invisible forces for his defiance (*Satyrice* 63). Lucian's *Philopseudeis* displays a similar routine, with philosophers taking turns contributing their own tales of sorcerers and miracle-workers. When Pliny the Younger and Lucian each tell their own variation on the same haunted house story, Pliny concentrates on precisely observed detail when recording the story for his friend Licinius Sura (*Epistulae* 7.27.5–11), while Lucian makes it a vehicle for a Pythagorean philosopher's boastful account of an exorcism (*Philops.* 31).

Some occasions are treated as opportune for the recounting of marvels, in particular occasions with a measure of relaxation. Reclining at a symposium might take pride of place, but other more spontaneous occasions, like a break in a wearisome journey, can serve equally well.<sup>39</sup> Another echelon of wonder-narration is offered by tour guides, temple staff, and the like: note Eucrates' account of the oracle given him by the statue of Memnon (Lucian, *Philops.* 33), or an account of the Trojan War from an Egyptian priest and inscriptions as noted by mid-first to early second century CE orator and historian Dio Chrysostom (*Orationes* 11.37). We have noted the storytelling context of "Cupid and Psyche," in which a magic palace offers a stark contrast to the squalor of the young listener's hostile surroundings, and the *Imagines* offer a more unusual angle in the telling of myths to a child going around a picture gallery, as discussed above.

## CONCLUSION

We can draw the threads together to produce an overview of the marvelous in antiquity. No single phenomenon comfortably embraces the whole range of the marvelous, but the same materials and motifs surface repeatedly. As early as the *Odyssey* we already have a sense of the repertoire of the marvelous, from which, however, the narrator may choose to distance himself. It is worthwhile to draw some distinction between the marvelous of the "wonders of nature" as factual wonders finding their way into stereotypical lists, and the invented marvels of fantasy. The first leads us to Phlegon and other collectors of *peri thaumasiōn*, often covering phenomena that had yet to find satisfactory scientific explanation; the fantasy marvels, alternatively, eventually lead to *Nephelokokkygia* and Lucian's *Verae historiae*. Epic, comedy, fairy tale, and novel can accommodate a substantial cross-section of marvelous material. The marvelous unsurprisingly is most markedly so on the outer fringes of the known world, as in the *Odyssey* and Herodotus, and not for nothing does Lucian set his wonder-seeking journey in the *Verae historiae* past the Pillars of Heracles into the vast unexplored Ocean.

In the context of a cultural history of fairy tale we should address the various cultural levels at which the marvelous can operate. Wherever we encounter it

we can see that the spectrum is quite broad. A collected list of paradoxographic “acts” like those of Phlegon of Tralles or Apollonius Paradoxographus, author of *Historiae thaumasiae* (“Accounts of Wonders,” c. second century BCE), could appeal to an audience or reader on a low cultural level: consider the freed slaves’ conversation at Trimalchio’s dinner party. But the educated guests in Lucian’s *Philopseudeis* reveal the visitors to Eucrates’ bedside gawping at the reports of a number of foreign magicians, Hyperborean, Chaldean, and Egyptian alike. Wonders appear in the most sophisticated and ornamental literature: the descriptions of Europa in Moschus’s poetry or Achilles Tatius’s romance novel show that the marvelous can find a place in any literary context, however elevated. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, repository of so many marvelous tales, tends to emphasize the ethos of Hellenistic catalog poem. Though occasionally allowing for attributions to a rural or peasant context, as in the story of the Lycian men turned to frogs (Ovid, *Met.* 6.313–80), in general Ovid’s epic poem belongs to the salons of the educated.



## CHAPTER TWO

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# Adaptation

### *Transmission, Translation, and Diffusion of Ancient Tales*

EMANUELE LELLI

(TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY DEBBIE FELTON)

Even today, discussion about the different types of popular narratives that circulated in the ancient world revolves around such various terms as “fable,” “fairy tale,” and “folktale.”

As Kenneth Kitchell points out in Chapter 4, we find a prominence of animal protagonists in fable as well as a focus on moral lessons; “fable” tradition thus generally signifies short, often allegorical tales. Fairy tales, on the other hand, are narratives that often involve magic and magical characters, such as witches, wizards, and fairies, and focus primarily on human protagonists, such as kings, queens, knights, princes, princesses, and peasants. Talking animals may appear in fairy tales, but only as encountered by the principal, human characters, and the talking animals themselves often turn out to be enchanted humans. Both fables and fairy tales comprise types of folktale.

As this volume demonstrates, we have indisputable evidence that folktales, including fables and fairy tales, circulated throughout the ancient world, including Greece and Rome. Animal fables are attested in the earliest literary evidence, and held a particularly prominent place in rhetorical and educational exercises. In fact, fables comprise one of the most frequently used types of

folklore in antiquity. The existence in antiquity of genuine fairy tales—that is, of the type that still appear in modern literature, along with their typical protagonists and magical aspects—has recently been more strongly recognized and reevaluated, thanks to the invaluable hermeneutical tool of comparison (Braccini 2018).<sup>1</sup>

We must admit, however, that beyond the very few substantial examples that have survived—the most notable being the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* (second century CE)—traces of fairy tales in ancient Greece and Rome are so limited as to suggest that there may be historical and social reasons why ancient cultures did not appreciate such tales—in contrast to other, later cultures. Quite likely the negative perception of magic and of figures such as tyrants (Greece) or kings (Rome) among the learned, “elite” classes of Greece and Rome, along with their fundamental conviction that art must teach rather than delight and entertain, contributed to the dearth of fairy tales being transmitted through recorded literature. This does not mean, however, that such tales were not circulated orally; only that they were marginalized by the dominant culture, like many other folk elements considered unsophisticated and consequently snubbed by the upper classes.

It is also possible that a number of adaptations occurred back and forth between oral and written stories. While fairy tales may seem to be “lesser” versions of stories from myth, such as the myth of the Greek hero Theseus and his rescue of the princess Andromeda from a sea monster, the reverse is also possible: narrative patterns from fairy tales that originally circulated orally may have been “absorbed” or adapted into myth (especially in Greece) and ennobled, with their protagonists turned into gods and heroes. Similarly, popular folktale figures such as werewolves, ghosts, and other such supernatural creatures seem to cross the boundaries between myths and fairy tales, appearing in both types of story. In short, when it comes to folktales in ancient literature, animal fables predominated over what we might think of as fairy tales. Let us therefore turn to Aesop first.

## WITHIN A GENRE AND BEYOND

The first attestations to the oral transmission of fables attributed to Aesop appear in the works of the comic playwright Aristophanes. In *Peace* (421 BCE, 129–30) the character Trygaeus, wishing to end the Peloponnesian War, plans to fly to Heaven on a dung beetle to speak with the gods. When his young daughter remarks that the creature seems an odd choice of transport, Trygaeus responds, “It is found in the stories of Aesop that this beetle is the only creature that can fly to the gods” (129–30), further explaining that the beetle “once upon a time, sought vengeance against the eagle” (133; G 153, P 3).<sup>2</sup> In Aristophanes’ *Birds*

(414 BCE), one character reproaches another, calling him “stupid” because he has “never read Aesop” (471) and therefore is ignorant of cultural touchstones.<sup>3</sup>

Is it possible that a written collection of Aesop’s fables was already circulating in Athens in the fifth century BCE, when Aristophanes wrote his plays? Not until the Hellenistic period do we find evidence of a written text that collected several dozen (or more) fables under the name “Aesop.” Demetrius of Phalerum (c. 350–c. 280 BCE), a pupil of Aristotle—who had encouraged his students to assemble and catalog their Greek literary heritage—compiled a collection of animal fables, explicitly defining them as attributed to Aesop; hence the work’s title, *Aesopeia*. Demetrius’s work itself has not survived, but is well attested,<sup>4</sup> and can therefore be said to mark the birth of a “literary” genre destined to be highly influential in the Western cultural tradition.

The first real figure to act as a conscious author of the “genre” is the Roman fabulist Phaedrus (first century CE). The personality and the autobiography (real or fictional) of the poet come across strongly in the book that circulates under his name; this is an absolute novelty for the ancient fable. The prologues Phaedrus provides to each of the five books of his collected fables reveal a mature awareness of the mechanisms, the status, and the matrices of the fable genre, as in his prologue to book 1 (lines 3–7):

Duplex libelli dos est: quod risum movet  
Et quod prudenti vitam consilio monet.  
Calumniari si quis autem voluerit,  
Quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae,  
Fictis iocari nos meminerit fabulis.

Twofold’s the genius of the page,  
To make you smile and make you sage.  
But if the critics we displease,  
By wrangling brutes and talking trees,  
Let them remember, ere they blame,  
We’re working neither sin nor shame.

(translation by Christopher Smart)

Aesop himself thus becomes one of the characters in the fables of Phaedrus’s Latin collection. In the first book, Phaedrus declares the authority of the legendary Aesop on the subject of folktales. In the second book, with almost Aristotelian terminology, he clarifies the rhetorical boundaries of the fable, which falls into the category of *exempla*, and its dual function: “correcting the errors of mortals” and “sharpening the wit.” Even literary controversies become part of Phaedrus’s declarations. In the epilogue of his second book



he claims to have sought a role “alongside” the inventor Aesop, in the spirit of *aemulatio* (emulation) rather than envy. The prologue of the third book is somewhat autobiographical: Phaedrus laments that he is barely accepted in the circle of poets, since the fable is considered a humble genre, not worthy of particular attention.

This bitter observation offers a starting point for retracing the origins of the fables, as Phaedrus provides a sociopolitical key: former slaves devised stories in the fable form because, not daring to speak openly, they could express their resentments allegorically, disguised in these little stories—and thus escape any accusations of slander. Phaedrus explains that he himself was the target of the accusations, and by a powerful figure: the Roman official Sejanus, a close friend of the emperor Tiberius (3.39–44). Phaedrus was put on trial, but survived. In his prologues, he explains that his intention was not to “accuse the individual” but to “show the characters of men”—a significant consideration, one that hints at the potentially autobiographical value of Greek and Roman fables more generally. Not coincidentally, the epilogue of the third book concludes with an Ennian quote of proverbial flavor: “it is dangerous for a commoner to protest openly.” The affirmation of the prologue to the fourth book is interesting, in which Phaedrus claims to define his own non-Aesopian fables, because “he has presented few, while I offer more, exploiting an ancient genre, but new subjects” (4.11–13). Phaedrus demonstrates a relevant awareness of the fable’s form and function, one which allows new fables to be written and to elaborate on new and old topics. One wonders, however, if Phaedrus’s fables were really all that novel, or if he still drew on oral traditions that had not yet appeared in other fable collections.

The fable becomes a more canonized literary genre with the Greek author known as Babrius (second century CE), who claims to have given refined poetic form to the fables that Aesop first introduced to the Greeks from the East. Avianus (c. 400 CE) who wrote Latin fables taken, on the whole, from Babrius, retraces the history of the genre, quoting Aesop, Socrates, Horace, Babrius, and Phaedrus. His explicitly stated purpose is to “delight the soul, stimulate ingenuity, relieve worries, and discover the agreement of life.” *Docēre* and *delectāre* (“to instruct and delight”) thus became the two canonized functions of the genre, transmitted to the Middle Ages and then to our modern age.

## ISSUES OF SOURCE AND TRANSLATION

The first fable attested in Greek (and therefore Western) literature could be a translation: the story of “The Nightingale and the Hawk” in the poet Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE, 202–12). Hesiod is a fundamental figure of mediation between the cultures of the Near East and the Greek world. Many

of the elements in his poems, such as the succession myth of the Greek gods (*Theogony*), appear in Near Eastern texts dating back as far as the second millennium BCE. It is highly likely that Hesiod also borrowed from the East the only clear fable (*ainos*) in his poems. This fable, as Gert-Jan van Dijk recently pointed out, contains intricate nuances and complex meaning, including perhaps an autobiographical level.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, this fable with animals, which has a clearly ethical function, is attested before any other in Greek or Latin literature. Does the fable, in Western culture, start with a translation?

For early translation of fables from other cultures into Greek, we can also consider a fragment of Aeschylus (fifth century BCE) from the tragic drama *Myrmidons*: “Even so is the Libyan fable famed abroad: the eagle, pierced by the bow-spied shaft, looked at the feathered device and said, ‘Thus, not by others, but by means of our own plumage, are we slain’” (fr. 139 Radt 1985). This is the earliest occurrence of the fable known as “The Eagle Wounded by an Arrow” (P 276), and Aeschylus’s version has become proverbial. Perhaps the most interesting element of the piece is its reference to the “Libyan” origin: what, then, was the fable’s significance for the Athenian public of 470–460 BCE? Was there awareness of a cultural mediation that had brought some oral folktale traditions from the East and Mediterranean Africa to Greece?

Meanwhile, we can also consider what may be authentic Greek translations of at least some of the so-called *Vita* (*Life of Aesop*),<sup>6</sup> probably elaborated during the second and third centuries CE, part of which appears to have been borrowed rather precisely from the Aramaic text known as the *Romance of Abiqar*, dating to at least the fifth century BCE. However, the *Vita* itself does not belong to the fable tradition in its strictest sense, even if the fabulist Aesop is its protagonist; rather, it is the fundamental reelaboration of this figure and his world (see below).

As with many other literary genres, the Romans borrowed the fable form from the Greeks, where, as discussed above, it was canonized as a genre through the translation process. Aside from the popular stories, legends, and fables that certainly were told in Rome during the period of the monarchy (753–509 BCE) and the early republic (fifth to third centuries BCE), it is with the *Satires* of the Roman republican poet Quintus Ennius (c. 239–169 BCE), one of the first mediators of Greek culture in Rome, that we find the first Aesopic fable to appear in the newly born Latin literature: a translation from the Greek of “The Lark and the Reapers.” In fact, the history of Aesopic fables becomes, in Rome, a history of translations. The satirist Lucilius (c. 180–103 BCE) and Horace (65–8 BCE), who numbered satires among his many poems, borrowed fables from the Greek. But the first comprehensive *collection* of Aesopica was compiled by the Latin fabulist Phaedrus, as mentioned above. In the prologue to his first book (lines 1–2), he states,

Aesop auctor quam materiam repperit  
hanc ego polivi versibus senariis.

Aesop is the author of the subject  
I have elaborated in Senarii.<sup>7</sup>

Phaedrus returns to the Greek tradition in the prologues of his third, fourth, and fifth books, emphasizing the subject's abundance: "There abounds such a great volume of material that a craftsman would be lacking for the work, not work for the craftsman" (*materiae tanta abundet copia / labori faber ut desit, non fabro labor*; bk. 3, epilogue, line 7). In the bilingualism that characterizes the Roman culture among both the educated and uneducated classes from the first century CE, on the other hand, the distinction between written and oral traditions of the different languages does not seem to be emphasized. Rather, the authors draw indifferently from the inexhaustible reservoirs of both cultures, without making explicit the source or nature of the translation—a further sign, perhaps, that folktales of all kinds were perceived in a non-authorial way.

## DIFFUSION AND CIRCULATION

There are more than a few pieces by ancient authors that provide indications as to the contexts in which folktales and other types of story were told. As early as the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, tells the faithful swineherd Eumaeus a story that has the flavor of a fairy tale and that is called an *ainos* (14.508). The context appears typical not only of the ancient world: a meeting of friends and acquaintances, in front of the hearth, after a meal, in the evening—a storytelling scenario that becomes traditional in the ancient and modern collective imagination.

In Aristophanes' comic play *Wasps* (422 BCE), Bdelycleon, the son, berates his father Philocleon for telling *mythous*, which here means "fabulous tales," such as the infantile tale of a flatulent Lamia (*Wasps* 1177). Bdelycleon insists that Philocleon tell instead of *anthrōpinon*, practical, real things people might speak of around the house (1179–80). But Philocleon responds with the beginning of an otherwise-unknown tale, which has as protagonists "a mouse and a weasel" (1182)—evidence for another early transmission of fable, and one perhaps reflecting a generational and class divide as represented by Bdelycleon, who responds that his father should not tell such low-class stories before a high-class audience (1184–5).<sup>8</sup> The same seems to be reflected in Aristophanes' *Peace*, when the young daughter of Trygaeus expresses dismay at her father's foolish plan to fly to the realm of the gods on the back of a dung beetle, to which Trygaeus responds, "In Aesop's stories, it is the only winged creature to be found that has been able to fly to the gods!" provoking this response from his daughter: "You have told an unbelievable tale (*mythōn apiston*)!" (*Peace*

127–31). The evidence from Aristophanes suggests that, in Athens in the second half of the fifth century BCE, the “Aesopic fable” was seen as belonging to the culture of an older generation.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, in *Birds*, the Athenian character Pisthetaerus calls one of his fellow-citizens “ignorant” (*amathes*) for not having conscientiously studied Aesop (Ar., *Birds* 472). Pisthetaerus also later reminds the Hoopoe, king of the birds, of one of Aesop’s fables, about how the fox fared very badly after doing business with the eagle (652–4). Similarly, in *Wasps*, Philocleon points out that defendants on trial will try anything to win the judge’s favor, including telling stories, like “something comic from Aesop” (*Aisopou ti geloion*; Ar., *Wasps* 566). Such examples suggest that this fable heritage was perceived as basic to Athenian culture, and perhaps to Greek culture in general, during this period. Moreover, a subset of fable that may be referred to as “Sybaritic” (and that is non-Aesopic) seems to play an important part in Greek fable heritage, particularly in comedy. Sybaris, a Greek settlement in the part of southern Italy known as Magna Gracia, was known for its wealth and the resultant luxurious lifestyle that wealth allowed. Sybaritic stories thus tend to reflect a certain opulence, and paint the Sybarites as rather spoiled and simpleminded. For example, in *Wasps*, Philocleon twice refers to Sybaritic fables. First, he mentions a man of Sybaris who, because he was a highly inexperienced driver, fell from his chariot and hurt his head, and was consequently told to stick to what he knows (1427–32). Shortly thereafter, Philocleon tells the story of a woman of Sybaris who broke a box, causing the box to call a witness to its injury—whereupon the woman advised it simply to bandage itself (1435–40).

Comedy was certainly not the only outlet for references to fables, whether Aesopic or not. Sophocles’ *Ajax* references two non-Aesopic (and otherwise unknown) tales, in a debate between Menelaus and Teucer (1142–56). Moreover, whereas the above example about court cases from *Wasps* (566) appears in a comic context, we find a similar observation in the first century BCE in two serious rhetorical treatises. The first, the anonymous *Ad herennium*, suggests that if those listening to a court case are becoming bored, it is useful to resort to “something that may move them to laughter,” such as a “fable” (*ab aliqua re quae risum movere possit ... fabula*; 1.6.10). Likewise, Cicero in *De inventione* suggests that one strategy to ensure that the audience does not become fatigued is to make them laugh, for example by telling a story or fable (*vel apologum vel fabulam*; 1.17.25). Moreover, in the fourth century BCE one the greatest political orators of the ancient world, Demosthenes, provides two examples in which he manages to maintain the public’s attention thanks to Aesopic animal fables.<sup>10</sup> Also in the fourth century BCE, Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, after giving several Aesopic examples, affirms that “such stories (*logoi*) are suitable for use in public speaking (*dēmēgorikoi*)” (2.20.7). Thus, we can

see a strong usage of the political and judicial function of fables over the course of several hundred years. On this point, consider also what the first-century CE rhetorician Quintilian says about the well-known fable used by the patrician Menenius Agrippa over five hundred years earlier in his attempt to end the secession of the plebians of Rome in 494 BCE—a fable used several decades earlier than Quintilian by the Roman historian Livy:

And those *fabellae*, which—even if they did not originate from Aesop ... nevertheless are best known by Aesop's name—usually appeal to the minds of country folk and uneducated workers, which more readily accept fictional stories, and when captivated by enjoyment, easily agree with the stories by which they are delighted. Thus Menenius Agrippa is said to have brought the plebs and patricians back into favor with each other, using the *fabula* about the quarrel between the limbs and the belly.

(*Institutio Oratoria* 5.11.19)

Note that Quintilian's comment also hearkens back to Bdelycleon's admonition that his father should not tell such low-class stories to a high-class audience (Ar., *Wasps* 1184–85). Further evidence for the political use of fable appears in the work of the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, where we find two examples. In the first, the Greek general Eumenes tells the Persian satraps and Macedonians the cautionary fable of "The Lion in Love" (19.25.5–6; P 140). In the second, Viriathus, leader of the Lusitanians who were resisting Roman rule in the second century BCE, tells the fickle inhabitants of Tucca, who keep switching sides, the fable (*ainon*) of "The Man and His Two Wives": "A man who was middle-aged married two wives. The younger one, wanting her husband to be the same age as she was, pulled the gray hairs out of his head, while the older one pulled out the black hairs. Finally, his head having been plucked by both of them, he became bald" (33.7.6; P 31). Viriathus's point is that both the Romans and Lusitanians kill their enemies, so the Tuccans will not survive if they do not choose a side and stick with it.

## ALLUSION, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND TRANSFORMATION ACROSS GENRES: ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREECE

As we have seen, Greek fables were not canonized as their own genre for many centuries. They did, however, appear in various ways in almost all other literary genres that existed at the time. That is, before its codification, the Greek fable seems to have had an important function within and across genres, as is also evident with fable use in Roman times. From the earliest attestations, two fundamental aspects of the use of fable in other literary genres are clear, as

discussed above: the often-autobiographical nature of the reference to a fable, and the fable's polemical, political, and social function.

In archaic and classical Greek culture a fable is usually explicitly introduced with distinctive terminology, such as the word *ainos*, to emphasize its nature and value. This is the case with the first fable to appear in Greek literature, "The Nightingale and the Hawk," from Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The fable has a clear moral function and rhetorical strategy: it constitutes an element of persuasion toward Hesiod's brother Perses, the recipient of the poem. The fable admits of various interpretations, a quality that derives precisely from the allusive way in which it is introduced. An earlier version may have had more of a lead-in, such as the presentation of the characters, or a first scene motivating the hawk's action, that Hesiod omitted—possibly because his audience already knew it. Certainly, the allusiveness that already characterizes this first use reveals a maturity of the tradition—the oral tradition, at least—of the fable in Greek culture.

In no early text other than the *Works and Days* does an animal fable appear. Animal fables are surprisingly absent from the epic tradition, from its origins to the Roman imperial period. The *Works and Days*, despite being composed in the epic meter (dactylic hexameter), is not a heroic epic but a didactic poem intended to teach Perses, who was evidently not a hard worker, how to be a farmer and make a decent living. Didactic poetry was popular in the Near East and Egypt and contained various bits of proverbial wisdom; it would be highly surprising if none of this had influenced Hesiod (see Walcot 1962). But although heroic epic seems to have excluded animal fable, we find an *ainos* in the *Odyssey*, as mentioned above (14.508). Odysseus, disguised as a beggar in his own dining hall among the high-born suitors of Penelope, aims to obtain a cloak to protect himself from the cold. Pretending to be a Cretan returning from the Trojan War, he tells a story in which Odysseus is a character, along with himself—"the Cretan"—and Menelaus, king of Sparta. These three Greeks are leading troops in a sortie against the Trojans. As they near the city walls, snow begins to fall, but "the Cretan" has forgotten his cloak and asks Odysseus to help him, lest he die of cold. Odysseus cunningly asks if anyone is willing to go back for reinforcements, and one soldier eagerly volunteers and runs off, leaving his cloak behind. Odysseus, knowing this would happen, has thus provided "the Cretan" with a cloak.

Odysseus, the narrator of this story-within-his-story, tells the tale to remind his audience that he, still in his role as "the Cretan," was once an important commander, but now, in beggar's clothes, gets no respect. The story has the desired effect: Eumaeus makes sure the "beggar" is provided with animal skins and other suitably warm accoutrements—thereby also demonstrating his humanity, in contrast to the mocking suitors. And indeed, the narrative of Odysseus here offers various folktale elements, starting from the context of

narration and the way it is introduced: “listen to me now, Eumaeus, and all you other comrades, / I will tell you a story (*epos*)” (*Od.* 14.462–3). Characteristic, too, is the presence of a king (Odysseus himself, if as yet unrecognized) who with his cunning resolves a difficult situation, a typical element of popular fairy tale. Also characteristic is the desired object—the cloak—present, for example, in the Aesopic fable of “The Spendthrift and the Swallow.” In this story, a young man wastes all of his money trying to keep up appearances and is down to the clothes on his back, when he sees a swallow flying by and assumes springtime has come. He therefore sells off his cloak. But soon the weather turns frosty again, and the young man laments that the cold is likely to kill both him and the swallow (P 169). Could the tale told by Odysseus, then, derive from a popular oral tradition, adapted to the protagonists of the epic poem? If so, it might be the only fairy-tale remnant in the Homeric poems and in all of Greek epic.<sup>11</sup>

Turning to Greek archaic lyric poetry, we find more frequent use of fables, introduced both explicitly (as in Hesiod) and—for the first time—in a more roundabout way. In the work of Archilochus (seventh century BCE), of which we have only fragmentary remains, we find two fables, both explicitly introduced with the term *ainos*: “The Eagle and the Fox” (fr. 174–81 W; P 1) and “The Ape and the Fox” (fr. 185–7 W; P 81). In each, the poet seems to identify himself with the fox. A third possible fable in Archilochus may be that of “The Wolf and the Well-fed Dog” (fr. 237 W; P 346), in which a dog offers to help a wolf get regular meals from his master. The wolf is interested, but upon noticing the bald spot on the dog’s neck where the collar has worn away the fur, bids farewell to the dog—the moral being “Better to starve free than be a fat slave” (Adrados 1979: 527; Nøjgaard 1964: 450; Van Dijk 1997: 147–8). Other fragments of Archilochus’s poetry suggest allusions to fables known to his public, sometimes condensed in the form of a proverb.<sup>12</sup> It seems that at least one fable was explicitly told in the lyric poems of Semonides (seventh century BCE): “The Heron and the Buzzard” (fr. 9 W; P 443). The fable of “The Eagle and the Beetle,” mentioned in Aristophanes, as discussed above, may be alluded to in another poem (fr. 13 W; P 3). Moreover, several fragments from other lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries seem to refer to fables that alluded to politics.<sup>13</sup>

Another early example of the polemic use of fable appears in the work of Pindar (c. 518–438 BCE), a lyric poet from Thebes. His contemporaries likely recognized this metaphorical jab against his two main rivals, Bacchylides and Simonides: “Skilled is the man who knows things by nature. But those who have learned hastily / from chattering like crows speak in vain at the divine bird of Zeus” (Pindar, *Olympian* 2.86–8). Pindar equates his two rival poets with crows that cannot compete with the eagle (Gentili et al. 2013: 50–3). Pindar’s joke probably alludes to the Aesopic fable of the eagle and the raven (Aes. 5) whose general meaning is that one cannot imitate the inimitable: a crow wanted



to imitate an eagle in grasping a lamb with claws, but got stuck and was caught by the shepherd.

As with epic, tragedy appears to be another literary genre in which fable rarely makes an appearance, fable “presumably being too homely for these genres,” given their generally solemn tone (Finglass 2011: 459). We have already noted the presence in Aeschylus’s *Myrmidons* (fr. 138 Radt 1985) of “The Eagle Wounded by an Arrow”; the reference is also significant as the first attestation of “Libyan fables” in Greek literature. So is Aeschylus alluding to oral traditions, or to collections that were already circulating under the names of North African authors? This passage from Aeschylus was subsequently quoted rather frequently, starting in comedy with *Birds* (807–8). But as the fable was also condensed in a proverb, as noted above, it could have been circulating already in the fifth century BCE, allowing for a broader adaptation across genres.

Another appearance of fable in tragedy occurs in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* (717–36). Recalling the destructive effect Helen had on Troy, the chorus sings what may be a reference to a fairy tale or fable. Once, a man raised a lion cub in his household. While young, it was gentle with the children and allowed itself to be petted. But when it grew up, its true nature emerged, and it devoured the man’s livestock. The story in this specific form, particularly the apologue, does not appear in the Aesopic collections, but clearly forms a variant on the story of the shepherd who raises one or more wolf pups with his dogs, only to have them kill the sheep (Aes. 313, with variant 314; P 209, G 34). Has Aeschylus adapted a folktale with animals previously known to his audience via oral tradition? What changes might he have made, and why? Or was a version like this already circulating? The questions are complicated by Aristophanes’ allusion to this same fable in *Frogs*, when, in the contest between Euripides and Aeschylus as to who is the better tragic poet, Dionysus asks them what they think of the controversial figure Alcibiades, and Aeschylus remarks, “One should not raise a lion cub in the city. / But if a cub *is* brought up there, serve its needs” (1431–2, emphasis in the original). Aristophanes’ Aeschylus is most likely alluding to his own lines, recontextualizing them as a proverb; and instead of Helen, the lion here is Alcibiades.

As mentioned above, in a debate between Menelaus and Teucer in the *Ajax* Sophocles references two non-Aesopic, rather peculiar fables (1142–56). In fact, some of their elements are quite fairy-tale-like in their indefinite time and characters: “Once I saw a man,” Menelaus begins, describing how the man, “bold in speech,” had no trouble urging sailors to set forth during bad weather, but who, when the storm was at its worst, suddenly had nothing to say; “and thus it is with you and your furious speech,” he says to Teucer, “a great storm ... will quench your shouting.” Teucer responds with an equally indefinite tale about a man “full of foolishness,” who mocked others’ misfortunes and was warned that the same could befall him. Patrick Finglass suggests that, despite



fable being generally considered too unsophisticated for use in the serious genre of tragedy, the fables are appropriate to the context at this point in the play, as the two characters, at odds with each other, taunt each other with scornful stories (2011: 459–60).

Fable also appears only rarely in the historians. In the entire works of the fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus, whose works are replete with various fictional stories, only one real fable seems to be present: that of “The Fisherman and His Pipe” (Aes. 11a; P 11, G 290), narrated by Cyrus the Great of Persia to the ambassadors of the Ionians and Aeolians. They had come to Cyrus after he conquered Lydia, asking to be his subjects under the same terms as when they had been subjects of Croesus, the now-conquered Lydian king. Cyrus responds to their request with this story (*logos*):

There was a man, a flute-player, who, seeing fish in the sea, played his flute, thinking they would come out onto the land. When his expectation was disappointed, he took a casting-net, threw it, and drew out a great number of fish. Then, upon seeing them leaping about, he said to the fish, “As far as I’m concerned, you might as well stop your dancing, since you would not come out and dance when I played my flute!”

(1.141–2)

Herodotus explains that Cyrus told this story as a political admonition to the Ionians and Aeolians because, although he had previously sent them a message asking them to revolt from Croesus, they did not, and were ready to obey him only now that he had conquered Lydia (1.141.3). Like the fishing flute-player of the fable, Cyrus is not willing to wait in vain.

Beyond this unique example of an Aesopic fable, however, Herodotus’s narrative contains not fables but rather many folktales and folktale motifs that have survived from antiquity to modern times. We should note, however, that his contemporary, the Greek historian Thucydides, roundly criticizes Herodotus (though not by name) for including such material in his history, stating that “a lack of the fabulous” (*to mē mythōdes*) is preferable when trying to convey precise knowledge of the past (1.22). One such story in Herodotus is that of a Spartan woman who, as a child, had been the ugliest in the land, but became the fairest thanks to a spell of sorts performed at the sacred precinct of the deified Helen (6.61.2–5).<sup>14</sup> Herodotus also seems to allude to the earliest known variant of the Cinderella story (ATU 510A), the story of Rhodopis (2.134–5), though the more complete and clear version appears in the *Geography* of Strabo (c. 64 BCE–c. 24 CE). Set in pharaonic Egypt, Strabo’s story tells how Rhodopis, an exceedingly beautiful courtesan, was bathing one day when an eagle flew off with one of her sandals. The eagle brought the sandal to the Pharaoh, who was struck by its beauty and elegant workmanship and was curious as to its owner. So he sent his emissaries all

over the country in search of the girl to whom it belonged. Once he found Rhodopis, he made her his bride (17.1.33). Other typical elements of folktale have long been recognized in the Herodotean narratives about the Treasury of Rampsinitus (2.121–3; ATU 950), The Ring of Polycrates (3.40–3; ATU 736A), and the story of Candaules and his wife (1.8–12), in which King Candaules insists that his servant Gyges look upon his queen naked, resulting in the wife finding out, wanting revenge, and having Gyges kill the king and take his place.

We have already discussed above the metaphorical uses of fable in rhetorical and political oratory in Demosthenes and others. But in the fourth century BCE, the main appearance of fables, especially Aesopic, comes in the dialogues of Plato (Van Dijk 1997: 324). The many fables scattered throughout his dialogues include, among others, “Pleasure and Pain” (*Phaedo* 60c; P 445, G 523) and “The Fox and the Sick Lion.” In the latter, an old lion, no longer able to hunt, pretends to be sick as a ruse to get other animals to come visit him—upon which he would eat them. When the fox comes to visit, she greets the lion from outside the cave. The lion asks why the fox does not approach, and she responds, “I see tracks going in, but none coming out” (P 142, G 18). In *Alcibiades I*, Plato references this fable in a remark about how money seems to go into Lacedaemon but not come out again: “just as when, according to Aesop’s fable (*mythos*), the fox remarked to the lion [about the footprints]” (123a). Such references to known stories in Plato thus accompany the well-known *mythoi* he seems to have invented himself, such as the allegory of the cave (*Republic* 514a–520b).

The moral value of fables lends itself well to the function of philosophy. Together with *chreiai* (brief anecdotes of useful moral significance, usually about a specific character), fables comprised one of the most popular rhetorical devices in post-Socratic and Hellenistic philosophy of the fourth century BCE and later. One example is Aristotle’s reference to “The Lions and the Hares” (which he attributes to the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes), about how not everyone is necessarily equal, “just as the lions said when the hares spoke in the assembly and thought it right that everyone have equality” (Aristotle, *Politics* 1284a; P 450, G 21).<sup>15</sup> In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon has Socrates reference the story (*logos*) of “The Sheep, The Shepherd, and the Dog” (2.7.13–14; P 356, G 67), while Epicurus, Chrysippus, and other philosophers of the late fourth down through the third century BCE alluded to various Aesopic and other fables.

Between the end of the third and beginning of the second century BCE, a renewed interest in iambic and other lyric poetry offered a new format for traditional fables, picking up where the archaic lyric poetry of Archilochus and Semonides left off, with fables used metaphorically for personal attacks and moral sanctions.<sup>16</sup> But the widespread presence of fables in Hellenistic

literature also seems to derive from a new erudite interest in what was finally becoming a literary “genre”: toward the end of the third century, as mentioned above, Demetrius of Phalerum published his fable anthology *Aesopeia*. Around the same time, the allusive and metaphorical potential inherent in the fable did not escape the master of the allusion in the Hellenistic age, Callimachus of Cyrene (c. 310–c. 240), who found in the fable a most effective means to provoke controversy. If the *ad hominem* attacks in archaic lyric poetry were substantially political in nature, those in Callimachus were intended principally as literary criticism, often directed toward his own colleagues and rivals—such as Apollonius of Rhodes, whose *Argonautica* was the sort of long epic poem Callimachus seems to have scorned.

The second and fourth of Callimachus’s *Iambs* rely on fables. *Iamb* 2.12–15 alludes to a fable that Zeus transfers animal characteristics to men (Aes. 431), in lines where the poetic talents of Callimachus’s rivals are called into question in the last, fragmentary verses: “Eudemus [has] the voice of the dog, Philton that of a donkey, and ... that of a parrot, and the tragedians have the voice of those who populate the sea” (*Iamb* 2, fr. 192; Pfeiffer 1949: 10–13). These characters are all unknown to us, but the metaphorical value of the animals seems to reveal that, from Callimachus’s point of view, he considers Eudemus a terrible orator, Philton an inept poet, and the third person a banal imitator (if not plagiarist), and he seems to consider tragedy a fallen genre, one that no longer has any voice. *Iamb* 4, meanwhile, alludes to “The Trees and the Bramble,” also known as “The Olive Tree and the Fig Tree” (Aes. 439, B 64, P 413, G 203). In the original story, which probably has Near Eastern origins—a version of it appears in the *Romance of Abiqar*—two trees (e.g., a pomegranate and an olive) argue over which of the two is most beautiful, and a scraggly nearby bramble bush tries to get them to stop. In Callimachus’s version, we have a laurel quarreling with an olive tree, and this is a functional variation of the metaliterary polemic. The olive tree and the laurel, thanks to a series of allusive references, become metaphorical personifications of Callimachus himself and his student-rival Apollonius of Rhodes, author of the epic *Argonautica*, who are probably arguing about the merits of the epic genre (which Callimachus criticized). Interfering in the debate is the bramble, the metaphorical personification of an archaizing epic poet, who is contemptuously marginalized by the two rivals.<sup>17</sup>

Another Greek author, the Cynic philosopher Cercidas of Megalopolis (third century BCE), alludes in his poetry to the etiological fable known as “Zeus and the Tortoise” (fr. 7; Lomiento 1993; Aes. 106, P 106, G 508). Zeus invited all the animals to his wedding. The tortoise, however, was late, and when Zeus asked why, she replied “home is dear, home is best” (*oikos philos, oikos aristos*).<sup>18</sup> The god, insulted and angry, ordered the tortoise to carry her home with her wherever she went. The fable thus explains how the tortoise acquired its shell.

## ALLUSION, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND TRANSFORMATION ACROSS GENRES: ROME AND THE IMPERIAL PERIOD

Turning to early Italy, we know almost nothing about the heritage of fables and folktales that circulated in pre-Hellenistic Rome. Once we start having literary testimonies, however, the influence of the tradition already known in Greece becomes clear, as we see from early Roman comedy and satire. The playwright Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE) seems to refer to a fable of sorts involving an ox and a donkey in his *Aulularia* (226–35), but in general both Plautus and Terence (c. 195–c. 159 BCE) use proverbial expressions rather than outright fables in their comedies, as when characters refer to “entrusting the sheep to the wolf” (Plautus, *Pseudolus* 139–40, *Trinummus* 169–72; Terence, *Eunuchus* 832). In contrast to comedy, considerably more evidence of fable use appears in Roman satire. Between the third and second centuries BCE, the Roman poet Ennius alluded to Aesopic fables in his *Satires*,<sup>19</sup> which drew upon the invective model of archaic and Hellenistic Greek lyric poetry. Like the work of many ancient authors discussed here, Ennius’s *Satires* survive only in fragments passed down mainly via other writers. These indirect testimonies point to Ennius’s use of at least two fables, maybe more; but because they are decontextualized and fragmentary, it is impossible to hypothesize what function these fables could have had. The clearest reference is to “The Lark and the Farmer,” about the unreliability of friends and relatives and the importance of doing things on one’s own (*Satire* 2.57–8; see Menna 1983; Aes. 325, P 325, G 293). We know of it from a full prose version in Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* (2.29, second century CE), in which he acknowledges,

Ennius has composed this fable (*apologum*) of Aesop in tetrameter verse quite ingeniously and charmingly. Here are the last two lines of his version, which I very much think are worth taking to heart and committing to memory: “This will be the conclusion (*argumentum*) for you to always keep at the ready: Do not expect from friends what you can do yourself.”

The presence of Aesopic fables continues in the tradition of Latin satire after Ennius. Lucilius used the fable of the sick lion, though from the meager fragments preserved we cannot guess the context (Lucilius bk. 30, *Satire* 6, Krenkel 1970: 1074; Aes. 142, P 142, G 18). Horace alludes to the same fable, and here we have more context: concerned about the extent to which people will go after money by any means, namely, that wealth has a corrupting effect, he worries that, like the fox in the lion’s den, there will be no going back (*Epistle* 1.1.73–5). In his *Satires*, the work programmatically closest to the Greek iambic-satirical tradition, Horace uses two other Aesopic fables directly.

*Satire* 2.3 presents a dialogue between Horace and Damasippus, an acquaintance who has squandered his patrimony to collect works of art. Faced with this criticism, Damasippus responds by saying that Horace has delusions of poetic greatness, and tells him the fable of the frog that swells itself out of proportion in an attempt to imitate an ox's size—only to burst (314–20; Aes. 376a, P 376, G 349). In *Satire* 2.6, Horace's acquaintance Cervius tells "an old wives' tale" (*anilis fabella*), the fable of "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse" (*Satire* 2.6.80–117; Aes. 352, G 408).<sup>20</sup> Horace's use of fable thus tends toward the autobiographical, as also evidenced in various of his *Epistles*, including 1.7.28–32, where he asks his patron Maecenas for patience for having stayed too long in the country to restore his health, comparing himself to the fox who ate too much and could not get out of the wheat bin (Aes. 24, P 24). Overall, Horace uses fable allusions quite frequently in a number of his works.<sup>21</sup>

Starting in the first century BCE, we begin to find more attestations of what we can reasonably call "fairy tales" in the ancient world—including in Horace, whose line "Do not take a living child out from the belly of the Lamia who ate it" takes aim at poets who go beyond the criterion of verisimilitude, criticizing those who artificially overelaborate on a known story (*Ars poetica* 340). The Lamia, an ancient bogey attested as far back as Aristophanes, was used to frighten children into behaving properly and may have served as the prototype for the child-eating witches of later fairy tales (Braccini 2018: 167–74).<sup>22</sup>

Between the first and second centuries CE clearer traces of an intricate heritage of fairy tales begin to emerge in both Greek and Latin literature. One of the most significant storytellers from this period is Petronius, active during the reign of the emperor Nero. In what remains of his *Satyrica*, a satirical novel mixing prose and verse, we find at least two identifiable folktales narrated by different characters, in a typical storytelling context: a dinner party. The first story tells of an encounter with a werewolf (*versipellis*, literally "skin-changer") and contains many elements that became typical in later werewolf tales, such as the presence of a full moon and the man taking off his clothes before turning into a wolf (61–2). The second is "The Matron of Ephesus," about a widow famed for her chastity who turns out to be easily seduced, to the extent that she is willing to mutilate her husband's corpse to save her lover (111–12).<sup>23</sup> Finally, it has been hypothesized that Petronius alludes to the tale known as "The Frog King" (ATU 440) when the character Trimalchio, a former slave who has acquired great wealth, refers to himself by saying "Thus your friend, who was once a frog, is now a king" (*Sic amicus vester, qui fuit rana, nunc est rex*; 77; Hansen 2002: 145).

Another significant, similarly fragmentary text from this period is the *Mirabilia*, or *Book of Marvels*, by Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of the emperor Hadrian. The text contains stories of ghosts and ghouls, among other things, including the tale of Philinnion, a young woman who returned from the dead and

had sexual relations with a living man (who did not realize she was a revenant). Ghost stories appear throughout classical literature, particularly during this period, as for example the tale of a haunted house in Pliny the Younger (*Epistle* 7.27.5–11) and a very similar, if satirical, version in Lucian (*Philopseudes* 30–1).<sup>24</sup> Lucian also presents what may be a reworking of a popular story in his tale of an island populated by women who have donkey legs (*Ver. hist.* 2.46), creatures who may be based on the stories of Lamia and Empousa (Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 229). This is probably a reworking of a popular story that was already circulating in Syria in Lucian's time; traces of it, probably passed down from Arabian oral traditions, have appeared in literature of the Arab world since the tenth century.<sup>25</sup>

It is in the second-century CE *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, however, that we find perhaps the clearest examples of fairy tales preserved from classical antiquity. Early in this Roman novel, we come across a long story about a witch (*saga*), the characterization of whom provides an early prototype for later fairy-tale witches.<sup>26</sup> Another figure that will return repeatedly in modern fairy tales appears in a tale from Apuleius's eighth book (8.19–21): a dragon (*draco*) that turns into an old man to devour passersby. This story contains many similarities to modern Greek folk tales in which man-eating dragons have the power to turn into men to deceive their victims. This belief is also documented through the Byzantine Middle Ages, up through the popular romance poem *Digenes Akritas* (thirteenth century), in which the hero's bride is threatened by a dragon that appears to her as a seductive young man.<sup>27</sup> But the most well-known story from Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* is that of "Cupid and Psyche" (4.28–6.24, ATU 425B), the only true fairy tale from classical antiquity to have come down to us in its entirety. Later parallels are numerous and attested across many cultures. Despite some hyper-rationalist criticisms, it seems undeniable that with this story we have one of the most deeply rooted and uninterrupted fairy-tale traditions.<sup>28</sup> The *Metamorphoses*, in essence, truly reveal some of the richest folktales of all antiquity. Apuleius himself, in this preface, claims to have "tied together diverse tales" (*varias fabulas conseram*; 1.1), which surely circulated both orally and in anonymous collections lost to us, across the Mediterranean and the Middle East for hundreds or even thousands of years.

## REMEDIATION, TRANSFORMATION, AND REUSE

At least as far back as the fifth century BCE, especially in Athens, the versification of prose fables—especially those of Aesop—seems to have been a popular exercise. Moreover, when the typical features of fables became overly familiar, various authors began to invent new fables following the matrices of the emerging genre. Fable, in short, has been one of the most productive genres

in terms of replicability and adaptation, and Aesop's the most popular of the fables. Aesop himself, about whom very little is known for certain, became the protagonist of the fictionalized biography known as *Vita*, apparently a Greek adaptation of the *Romance of Ahiqar*, as mentioned above.

According to Plato, Socrates claims to have begun to put in verse the *mythoi* of Aesop (*Phaedo* 61b). This apparent rhetorical practice of transforming traditional fables into verse may have started even earlier, as suggested by some examples from the *Anthologia Palatina* (AP), a collection of Greek verse ranging from c. 700 BCE to the seventh century CE or so. One epigram, attributed to Leonidas (AP 9.99 = 32 G.-P.), adapts into verse the fable of "The Goat and the Vine," in which a goat devours all the branches of a vine, which replies that sooner or later it will regrow and produce the wine that will serve as a libation over the goat when it is sacrificed.<sup>29</sup> In the epigrams of Antipater of Sidon we find two reworkings of Aesopic fables: "The Priest and the Lion" and "The Snake and the Swallow,"<sup>30</sup> though Antipater does not set the latter at a courthouse as the Aesopic version does. Two more epigrams—the first attributed to Archias of Mytilene, the second perhaps from Archias of Antioch—reference animal fables not found in any Aesopic collections known to us. One is about a crow and a scorpion: the crow sees a scorpion emerging from the ground and swoops down to catch it, but the scorpion was faster, and stung the crow, killing it (AP 9.339 = 23 G.-P.). The other tells of a blackbird that flies into a net along with a flock of thrushes: the cords trapped the whole flock, but let the blackbird go free, because "truly, the race of singers is holy; for even speechless snares have a care for songbirds" (AP 9.343 = 24 G.-P.).

Similarly, the exercise of rewriting and paraphrasing "Aesopic fables, which are the closest thing to the type of stories told by nurses" was considered good practice for honing rhetorical skills, as Quintilian advises (*Aesopi fabellas, quae fabulis nutricularum proxime succedunt*; 1.9.2). The *fabellae* to which he refers seem to be those of the verse tradition: the boys must analyze each verse (*versus solvere*), then paraphrase them, then embellish upon the original as much as possible while still retaining the poet's meaning—which is a difficult task even for the most experienced instructors (1.9.2–3). This practice seems to have been popular in the first century CE, as the rhetorician Aelius Theon also wrote about how boys should start practicing "first of all *chreiai*, and then *mythoi*," with transformations from prose to verse and vice versa (Spengel 1854–6: 74–5). Additionally, thanks to recent discoveries, we find further evidence of exercises on *chreiai* and fables attested among educational papyri from the first century CE.<sup>31</sup>

Once the typical characteristics of fable are identified, one can also begin to "invent" new fables following the matrices of the genre. Pseudo-Demetrius, author of the second-century CE treatise *On Style*, specifically notes that "We can form many useful tales of our own to fit the circumstances, just like the man



who said that a cat's health declines or improves with the moon, and then made up his own story (*mythos*) that the moon gave birth to a cat" (3.158)—a fable about which we know nothing beyond this reference. The fabulist Phaedrus (first century CE), too, when he mentions having created "new subjects using an ancient genus" (*usus vetusto genus, sed rebus novis*; 4 Prol. 13), clearly suggests the possibility of creating new stories from known mechanisms and fixed types. From the point of view of reproductivity and reworking, in this sense, the fable is one of the most fruitful narrative types.

## REFLECTION AND THEORY

The first explicit reflection on the nature and confines of what we now call "fable" is that of Aristotle, who does for fable what he did with many other genres. In his *Rhetoric* (c. 350 BCE), among the principal instruments of reasoning he distinguishes between enthymemes, or *enthymēma*, namely, syllogisms, and examples, or *paradeigma*. He further divides *paradeigma* into two types: examples adduced by relating things that have happened before and examples invented by oneself. He then subdivides the latter into comparisons and fables, *parabolē* and *logoi*, with fables being "of the Aesopic and Libyan sort" (2.20.1–3 = 1393a23–1394a18). He cites only two fables with animals and contextualizes them in a political function (Clayton 2008: 186), and his overall assessment is that, as a rhetorical tool, although fable is easier to find it is less effective than historical examples.

By the time we get to pseudo-Demetrius's *On Style*, the attitude toward fable's use in rhetoric has changed: the treatise notes fable (*mythos*) as a fundamental element of the "elegant" style (3.157). Quintilian (5.11.19–21) also considers the fable among the *exempla* that a speaker has at his disposal: the function underlined by Quintilian is principally the persuasive one, particularly with respect to an "uneducated" audience. His examples seem to be derived from the Latin literary tradition, and include the fable of "The Belly and the Members" from Livy (2.32.9–11) and that of "The Fox and the Sick Lion" from Horace (*Epistle* 1.1.73–5). But it is to Aelius Theon (c. first century CE) that we may owe the first recognition of the fable (*mythos*) as an autonomous element, "a fictitious story (*logos*) giving an image of truth" (Spengel 1854–6: 72; Kennedy 2003: 23). Theon clarifies that the type of *mythos* he considers is exclusively one with a metaphorical meaning and a clear moral, and explains that "Fables are called Aesopic and Libyan or Sybaritic, and Phrygian and Cilician and Carian, Egyptian and Cyprian, but there is only one difference among them: the specific kind of each is indicated at the beginning." That is, they do not differ in content, structure, or style, only in the sources named: "for example, 'Aesop said,' or a Libyan man or one from Sybaris or a Cyprian woman 'said'" (Spengel 1854–6: 73;



Kennedy 2003: 23–4). Moreover, Theon points out, “‘Aesopic’ is not applied as a general term because Aesop was not the first inventor of fables—Homer and Hesiod and Archilochus and some others, prior to Aesop, seem to have known them.”<sup>32</sup>

Theon also discusses the terminology of the fable, noting that “Some of the ancient poets call fables *ainoi*, some *mythoi*. Prose writers most often call them *logoi* rather than *mythoi*,” making various etymological distinctions among words for speaking and advising, but perhaps more significantly Theon asserts that the entire point of the fable is “useful instruction” (Spengel 1854–6: 73–4; Kennedy 2003: 24). The fables that Theon takes into consideration to exemplify the school exercises he recommends include an otherwise unknown fable about a prince and a lion cub that had appeared in the dialogue *Zopyrus* of the Socratic philosopher Phaedo; the Aesopic fable of a camel that wanted horns and consequently lost its ears (P 117, G 510); and that of the greedy dog who dropped his meat upon seeing his reflection in a river (P 133, G 263). Theon closes his discussion of fable by reiterating the genre’s main characteristics, including what a fable should *not* contain, such as inconsistency and improbability. Overall, Theon’s treatise, along with other ancient rhetoricians’ theories about the nature of fable, emphasize the genre’s ethical and educational purposes. In short, there seems to be no room for the purely narrative and entertainment aspects of the fable.

Another first-century CE rhetorician, Lucillus of Tarrha, had also provided some reflection on the function of fables. Only fragments remain, but through those and comments by later authors familiar with Lucillus’s work we have a sense of what he might have said in his *On Proverbs*. He seems to have distinguished among various forms of allegorical and metaphorical discourse, such as the difference between a *paroimia*, generally a proverb of sorts with a transfer of meanings from lofty subjects to humble ones, and an *ainos*, an expanded narrative featuring principally animals and plants and only occasionally men and gods. The *paroimia*, while not a story, still offers the possibility of analogy, while the *ainos* can adapt its meaning to the persuasive needs of its user. Lucillus’s comments were taken up by many authors in various ways in later centuries, for both paremiographic collections (on the study and writing of proverbs) and rhetorical ones; in both cases, the educational character of the fables predominates.

Whereas many rhetoricians, such as Theon, tended to dismiss the entertainment value of fables, we find a different viewpoint from the orator Dio Chrysostom (c. 40–c. 115 CE). He argues that Aesop was very “wise and thoughtful” but also “wily” because he knew how to construct tales that people would want to listen to, without necessarily realizing that they were also being educated. Audiences would enjoy being instructed “with laughter and *mythoi*,” just as children learn from their nurses, not only paying attention but also being amused (*Oratio* 7.13). Thus, along with Quintilian, who (as mentioned above)

also saw the resemblance between the functions of fables and tales told by children's nurses, we have here one of the first attestations in which fables are admitted to be an educational method that can also be enjoyed—an aspect of fable that did not predominate until modern times. Plutarch also comments on the benefits of fables for children in the part of his *Moralia* entitled “How young people should heed the poets” (*Quomodo adulescens poetas audire debeat*; 1):

Of philosophical discourses it is clear to us that those seemingly not at all philosophical, or even serious, are found more enjoyable by the very young, who present themselves at such lectures as willing and submissive hearers. For in perusing not only Aesop's Fables, and Tales from the Poets, but even the Abaris of Heracleides, the Lycon of Ariston, and philosophic doctrines about the soul when these are combined with tales from mythology [e.g., Plato], they get inspiration as well as pleasure.

(translation by Babbitt 1927)

Similarly, Aulus Gellius states that Aesop's fables are often more educational than the austere and imperious dictates of philosophers, because the fables are good humored and entertaining (*festivos delectabilesque apologos*; 2.29.1).

Nevertheless, we must remember that, all across the ancient world, fable is never presented merely as a literature of escape for children: it always has an explicitly educational function. In the fourth and fifth centuries we have several testimonies to this effect. The emperor Julian (r. 361–363 CE) distinguishes between the functions of *ainoi* and *mythoi*, explaining that when myth was becoming popular among the Greeks, poets drew from it the *ainos*, “which differs from the *mythos* in being aimed toward children not merely to amuse but to advise.”<sup>33</sup> A century later, in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (c. 430 CE), the Latin grammarian and philosopher Macrobius seems to use *fabula* in the sense of “narration” more generally, but clearly distinguishes between *fabulae* of two types. The first type includes those that have been invented either only for the pleasure of those listening, or even for the sake of achieving an uplifting result (*aut tantum conciliandae auribus uoluptatis aut adhortationis quoque in bonam frugem gratia*), such as in the comedies of Menander. It also includes fictional stories full of the adventures of lovers (*argumenta fictis casibus amatorum referta*), such as those found in Petronius and Apuleius. These narratives, according to Macrobius, are suitable “for the cradles of the nurses,” and not for the “educated.” For educational purposes, he singles out Aesop's fables, as famous for the elegance of their stories (*Aesopi fabulae elegantia fictionis illustres*) as well as what he calls *narrationes fabulosae*, such as the myths of Hesiod, Orpheus, Pythagoras (1.2.7–12). Macrobius clearly writes from a Christian-educated position, one that emphasizes the educational role of the Aesopic tradition. At the same time, he offers a testimony to what kinds of story could be narrated by nurses: those similar to modern fairy tales.

The last reflection on the fable in the ancient world is that of Isidore of Seville on the threshold of the seventh century. *Fabula*, as in Macrobius, now seems to be a term of literary criticism that indicates fiction as opposed to history or chronicle, in which truth is inherent: “the ‘fables’ do not indicate events that actually happened, just those invented through their telling” (*fabulae ... non sunt res factae, sed tantum loquendo fictae*; *Etymologies*; 1.40). With *fabula*, therefore, the Iberian scholar defines the real fables (Aesopic or Libyan), but also the comedies (of Plautus or Terence), and again the myths of the great ancient poets.

## CONCLUSION

From its origins in the Greek and Roman tradition and probably even earlier, the fable has without doubt been one of the principal types of folklore to undergo highly significant adaptations. This adaptability perhaps derives from the fable’s popular origins and from the simplicity of the values it represents. The fable has been transformed through translations, reworkings, reductions, and allusions. It has proven itself useful in widely differing fields, such as politics, law, sociology, philosophy, history, and literature, not least because fable lends itself so well to rhetorical and theoretical discussions. But perhaps the most important characteristic that the fable has always preserved in every form and context is its pedagogical value. In the ancient world, fable as a genre does not seem to have been conceived (except on very rare occasions) as simply for enjoyment, much less as intended mainly for children. Whether employed at school or in other contexts entirely, fable was always valued for providing moral lessons. This may in part explain the rare presence of fantastical and magical elements; fable was intended to impart practical exemplars of appropriate and sensible behavior. These pedagogical roots still reflect the ultimate value that folktales suggests to any type of public, in all its forms, from children’s books where Aesopic tales are still summarized to fantasy series widely followed on Netflix by teenagers—and by many others.

## CHAPTER THREE

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# Gender and Sexuality

### *Reading Females, Males, and Other in Asian Folktales*

SERINITY YOUNG

Asian folktales, like those of many cultures, serve to instruct while they entertain, through examples of good and bad humans, divinities, animals, and spirits. Almost all of the Indian tales that follow are part of the broad religious canons of Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains that express different behavioral goals, yet share a common belief system, including what they consider to be the nature of women, which remains fairly consistent, and that of men, which required at times some modifications to accommodate celibate Buddhists and Jains. Women are defined mainly by their sexuality, within and outside of marriage, and as mothers. Men are defined by their social roles: the warrior, king, ascetic, wise man, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> These views are shared by Southeast and East Asians, especially in tales that express negative views of women, associating them with pollution and malevolent witches, ghosts, or fox spirits set on harming men. Beliefs in the instability of masculinity prime men to distance themselves from women through physical isolation, on the one hand, and by presuming that the high moral ground is exclusively male, on the other, leaving evil and malevolency to females.

## SWAN MAIDENS

One of the earliest compilations of tales in South Asia is the *Rig Veda* (c. 1200 BCE), a collection of hymns to the gods that presumes knowledge of a rich oral story tradition. One tale that reveals sharp gender distinctions and experiences of sexuality is also the first extant version of a swan maiden tale (Leavy 1994: 34). Urvaśī, a heavenly woman called an *apsarā*, leaves her mortal husband, King Purūravas, whom she married against her will. The Sanskrit word *apsarā* means “one who goes in the waters” and “one who goes between the clouds,” which refers to the fact that *apsarās* can shape-shift into swans, and some, like Urvaśī, are also swan maidens. They are divine women of tremendous beauty and charm, given as a reward to great heroes—usually those who have died in battle.

The *Rig Veda* version does not explain how King Purūravas won Urvaśī. Later versions say that because of a minor transgression she was thrown out of heaven and cursed by the gods to live with a mortal.<sup>2</sup> Even so, in the *Rig Veda* she can impose a taboo on Purūravas: she will leave if she ever sees him naked. Other celestial beings conspire to free her by attempting to steal some of Purūravas’s sheep late at night. Wakened by the sheep’s bleating, Purūravas jumps out of bed, stark naked, to stop the thieves. The heavenly beings then cause lightning to flash, revealing his nudity to Urvaśī (O’Flaherty 1981: 253), whereupon she flies away, leaving him and their son behind (Figure 3.1).

After a sorrowful search, Purūravas finds Urvaśī swimming in a lake. A third century BCE text, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (XI.5.4), says that when Purūravas finds her she is swimming with other *apsarās*, all in swan form;<sup>3</sup> Urvaśī has reverted to her swan body and to the companionship of her sister swan-*apsarās*. Purūravas pleads with her to return to him, arguing that they have been very happy. But she contradicts his version of their happy married life: “Indeed, you pierced me with your rod three times a day, and filled me even when I had no desire. I followed your will, Purūravas; you were my man, king of my body” (O’Flaherty 1981: v. 5, 253; see also vv. 11 and 13). Swan maidens do not make happy wives; their personal freedom is of paramount importance to them, and they wait for the moment they can be free. Children are often left behind, but they comprise an important element in swan maiden tales, demonstrating the females’ powers of fertility. In Urvaśī’s case, by having a son she also provides the country with an heir to the throne, which in Indian belief was a necessary prerequisite to ensure the ongoing fertility of the entire country. Fittingly, the *Rig Veda* verses devoted to this story are a type of hymn associated with fertility and may have been part of a ritual performance to obtain children (O’Flaherty 1981: v. 5, 245). The story ends with Purūravas intimating to Urvaśī that he might die without her, which moves her to promise he will go to heaven when he dies, becoming immortal.



FIGURE 3.1: Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), *Urvaśī and Purūravas*. Pen and ink illustration by Michele Angel, with permission.

Swan maiden stories are about men attempting to grasp the divine and to have children, and about men unable to understand women who flee these forced marriages. Once free, like Urvaśī, swan maidens often say how unhappy they were as captured brides, a sentiment that predominates in these earliest tales. One might only speculate that as time went on and women's status declined in society, these stories were transformed into love stories. Gender issues, as well as sexuality and shape-shifting, also prove central to these tales. In swan

maiden tales in many cultures, female swans are trapped in human form and compelled into unwanted marriages, with their attendant domestic chores, until they recover a stolen token (a feather, their wings, or an animal skin) that will release them, or until their captor breaks a taboo. Male variants of this tale exist; this is not the case in South Asia, however. In their most ancient forms these tales center on immortal women who can bring prosperity and children and lift mortal men into higher states of being, including immortality. In most cases the tale goes awry because the man breaks the condition set by the swan maiden, allowing her to regain her avian form and fly away. Thus, they are often tales about unsuccessful male encounters with the feminine divine that reveal primordial and enduring tensions between women and men—which is why they are still told. In general, these tales emphasize a woman's sense of being trapped in a marriage and her quest to escape from premodern domestic drudgery and the mundane world into a larger, less encumbered life (Leavy 1994: 2; see also Mills 1985: 125–45).

A. T. Hatto has suggested that since swan maiden tales focus on women they were first told by women and, consequently, reflect women's symbolic role as outsiders through virilocal systems of marriage, in which a bride moves into her husband's house with his parents, often in another village (1961: 334; see also Leavy 1994). Hatto has further argued that swan maiden tales are also connected to the migratory pattern of aquatic birds, which fly north in spring to mate and rear their offspring, returning south in autumn. While in the north, the parents, because they are molting, cannot fly; nor can their young. This natural cycle contains the main elements of the swan maiden tale: sudden appearance, molting of feathers (loss of the feather garment), temporary captivity, sex and fertility, and, ultimately, escape. Such drama called out for human players. Parenthetically, Hatto asks: "What wife from a far land can fail to be affected when she sees a bird spread its wings to fly?" (333). Yet these tales also describe male fantasies about capturing and overpowering women—especially independent women—and they often continue with the husband undergoing heroic hardships while searching for his lost wife. Many of these elements also appear in East Asian tales about Swan Maidens.<sup>4</sup>

In East Asia, the swan maiden motif occurs in tales about heavenly women dressed in feathers who descend to earth. A fourteenth-century Japanese Nō play titled *Hagoromo* ("The Feather Robe"), based on much earlier oral material, tells of a fisherman who, while admiring the beauty of the shoreline, finds a heavenly woman's feather robe hanging on a tree branch.<sup>5</sup> The fisherman steals the robe; when the woman appears and asks him for it, he refuses to return it. But, finally moved by the woman's sorrow, he offers to return the robe—knowing he will lose her—if only she will perform one of the dances of heaven for him. Donning her feather robe, she dances, and she and the chorus describe her heavenly home, the moon god's palace (Waley 1922: 223).<sup>6</sup> The Indian influence on this story is clear, as *apsarās* were renowned dancers and



part of a pan-Indian pantheon that traveled East with Buddhism. And although this swan maiden does not lead the man to immortality, she reveals to mortals a higher and more refined way of being.

Two Chinese stories written sometime before the tenth century follow the pattern in which swan maidens travel in groups or flocks and then one member is inevitably captured and forced to marry and procreate (Waley 1960: 236). In the first tale, the swan maiden instantly flies back to heaven when she recovers her robe, then enlists the help of her two sisters. All three return to earth and take her son to heaven, where he receives divine wisdom before returning to earth and becoming very wealthy.<sup>7</sup> In the second story, the swan maiden escapes but then returns to earth with three feather robes for the three daughters she has borne. Like true swan maidens, the daughters fly away to heaven the moment they put on their robes (149–55). In these tales the swan maidens are less heartless than *apsarās* who leave their children behind.

One Japanese story tells of a swan maiden who abandons her children. This swan maiden flies alone to earth, where she removes her feather robe and falls asleep. A farmer comes along, sees the robe (but not the woman), and takes it. When the woman awakens she is distraught, doomed to life on earth and even to forget about her life in heaven; memory or divine consciousness is, along with flight, an attribute of these robes. The story continues, “She felt the cold because her clothes were thin, and she also felt pangs of hunger. So she had to go down the mountain to the village and ask a farmer for some food” (Dorson 1962: 226). This farmer happens to be the same one who stole her robe; of course, she has no choice but to marry him. Eventually, she bears him two daughters. Years later the farmer, who never connected the robe with his wife, brings the garment out for the oldest daughter to wear. She puts it on and dances for the family, accompanied by her younger sister on the flute. Their mother says, “The form of your arms is not good. I’ll show you how.” So she takes the feather robe, dons it, and begins to dance. As she does so, she loses her human heart. Her body becomes light and rises up in the air. Astonished at this, the girls shout, “What’s the matter with you, Mother?” And the celestial lady answers, “Now I remember everything. I am the woman from the sky. I am going back to the heavens now. I should like to take you with me, but there is no room for human beings in heaven” (226–7). This tale remains true to the *apsarā* model. They were often said to be heartless, but here the swan maiden forgets her heavenly origins and her freedom, gaining a human heart only to lose it once she remembers her origins.

## WOMEN AS TEMPTRESSES 1: HINDU TALES

*Apsarās*, the celestial women of Hindu and Buddhist legends, are equally at home on the earth, in streams and rivers, flying through the sky, or dancing in heaven. They are shape-shifters who can be swan maidens, but mainly they are



understood to be divine. In their earliest forms *apsarās* are more powerful than humans but not quite as powerful as gods. They are transcendent beings, in that they reside in heavenly abodes, but they are also immanent, appearing on earth. The Hindu gods Indra, Brahma, and Viṣṇu rule over them, often using them as seductresses. As a heavenly reward promised to valiant warriors and to men of great spiritual accomplishment *apsarās* symbolize both immortality and sexuality. They are, after all, sometimes referred to as heavenly courtesans. On earth they often act as temptresses who can and do undermine men's spiritual power. For centuries, Hindu stories about individual *apsarās* captured the South Asian imagination.

*Apsarās* provide one of the most ancient examples of the role of celestial women as a heavenly reward for fallen warriors. In this sense, they share some characteristics with the Valkyries of Norse mythology: most markedly, several battle hymns from the *Atharva Veda* (c. 1000 BCE) call upon the *apsarās* to help slay the opposing army (VIII.8 and XI.9), while the *Mahābhārata* (c. first century CE) depicts them as leading fallen Hindu warriors to heaven, saying to them "be my husband" (XII.99.45; cited by White 2003: 35; and Krishnamorthy 1982: 15). This continued into the medieval period,<sup>8</sup> and subsequently into the modern period among the Rajputs, a Hindu warrior caste, who envisioned them hovering above the battlefield (White 2003: 282n48; Harlan 2003: 114–20).<sup>9</sup>

The *apsarās'* divine beauty, voluptuous bodies, and graceful, erotic movements drive men mad, overcoming them by arousing passion. These celestial creatures even entrance the gods; Indra and Śiva sprouted extra eyes to better see them (O'Flaherty 1987: v. 7, 215), while Brahmā was so delighted by one *apsarā* that he sprouted three additional heads to watch her without moving (Van Buitenen 1973–8: 1:203, 396–7). As accomplished singers, musicians, actors, and dancers, *apsarās* fill the heavens with their beauty and art. Appropriately, given their powers of seduction, a troop of *apsarās* accompanied Kāma, the god of love and desire (Basham 1959: 315; Hopkins [1915] 1974: 164).

At the behest of the gods, the *apsarā* Menakā brings about the fall of the mighty human sage Viśvāmitra, who through his austerities, especially celibacy, has built up so much supernatural power that even the gods tremble before him. To subvert his growing power, they send Menakā to seduce him. According to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. second century BCE), she flies down to earth to bathe in a lake on whose shores Viśvāmitra has spent over a thousand years practicing austerities. Upon seeing her beautiful nude body, he is overcome with desire and asks her to live with him, which she does for ten years. It was and remains a strong belief in Hinduism that men can gain spiritual power by withholding their semen, something *apsarās* excel at undoing, and when all of Viśvāmitra's spiritual power is gone, he reflects that "ten years have seemed to me to be but a day and night" (*Rāmāyaṇa*, v. 1, 125).<sup>10</sup> Menakā

has so intoxicated him that it is as if he entered a fairyland, where time as humans know it does not exist. In the *Mahābhārata* version, Menakā fears Viśvāmitra will burn her to ashes with his spiritual power if she tries to seduce him. She asks Indra to help by causing the wind to blow off her clothes and enlisting Kāma's assistance, all making her less culpable (Van Buitenen 1973–8: 1:162–3).

A shorter but nonetheless wonderful seduction story comes from the *Brahma Purāṇa* (1.69.7–101), a text compiled over centuries (c. 200–1000 CE). It describes the fall of another powerful sage, Kaṇḍu, before whom the great god Indra trembles. This time, Indra sends the *apsarā* Pramloca to seduce the sage; she is described as “fine-waisted, with beautiful teeth, full hips and ample breasts, and endowed with all the fine marks of beauty” (Dimmitt and Van Buitenen 1978: 259). Like Menakā, Pramloca is irresistibly beautiful, and she too fears the sage's power to curse, so Indra promises to send the powers of Love, Spring, and Wind to help her.

Pramloca flies down to earth and begins to sing near Kaṇḍu's hut. Spring causes the birds to sing, while Wind blows fragrant air and Love sends his arrows to disturb the sage. Kaṇḍu succumbs instantly, totally smitten. He relinquishes all his religious practices and instead makes love to Pramloca day and night for one hundred years. When Pramloca tries to return to heaven he repeatedly asks her to stay. She remains, fearful of his power to curse her. Finally, after 1,600 years, all his spiritual power is depleted and he comes to his senses. As in the story of Menakā and Viśvāmitra, Kaṇḍu has been so deluded that he thinks only a day has passed. He berates Pramloca but, recognizing his own weakness, does not curse her. Instead, he tells her to go, and she flies back to heaven.<sup>11</sup> The *apsarās'* yearning love is believed to affect only their victims, not themselves; they possess the maddening power of love but do not participate in it.

As with Menakā and the swan maiden Urvaśī, children conceived from such unions are usually abandoned at birth by their *apsarā* mother. The *apsarās* are meant to be childless women, unencumbered and available to generate love madness, although, contradictorily, their ability to have children demonstrates their powers of fertility.<sup>12</sup> Menakā's grandson and Urvaśī's son were both heirs to thrones, thus also renewing the fertility of entire kingdoms.

Counterintuitively, *apsarās* are also the reward for spiritual heroes, men whose spiritual advancement allows them entry to heaven. In the *Kauṣītaka Upaniṣad* (c. sixth/fifth century BCE), the god Brahmā instructs the *apsarās* to greet those men who have died after achieving the highest spiritual knowledge: “Run to him with my glory! ... He will never grow old!” Five hundred celestial nymphs [*apsarās* then] go out to meet him—one hundred carrying garlands, one hundred carrying lotions, one hundred carrying cosmetic powders, one hundred carrying clothes, and one hundred carrying fruits” (I:4b, *Upaniṣads*;

Olivelle 1996: 204). After a lifetime of celibacy, the spiritual heroes receive the favors of the *apsarās* as their reward. Like the *hourīs* of Islamic tales, *apsarās* are beautiful, sexually enticing women gifted by the gods to heroic men, whether that heroism is spiritual or martial.

The dangerous supernatural powers of celibate ascetics are also depicted in stories about ancient and early medieval Indian kings, who were perceived as semi-divine beings possessed of superhuman powers that enabled them to ensure the prosperity of their realms. Kings were believed to maintain the fertility of the fields and herds. They tried to duplicate the heavenly court of the god Indra by keeping in their courts beautiful, artistic women who impersonated the *apsarās* in their charm, beauty, and artistic talent, but who when ordered by the king would seduce and betray anyone posing a threat to the royal power. Such women are connected to the many tales in which a king can end a drought by simply sending a courtesan, imitators par excellence of *apsarās*,<sup>13</sup> to seduce a local celibate sage. Into the twentieth century, this theme continued to be enacted in an annual ritual to hasten the monsoon rains that was performed by *devadāsīs*, the sacred courtesans and dancers at the temple of Jagannātha in Puri (Marglin 1985: 101–8; see also Young 2004: 108–11). The connections between semen and rain have a long history in the ancient world (including Greece and Rome); both relate to fecundity and thus to power. By withholding his semen, a sage not only challenges Indra’s power but can actually blight the land, unless the king has greater command over the powers of fertility or can command the auspicious powers of a beautiful and fertile woman.<sup>14</sup>

*Devadāsī* means “servant of god”; *devadāsīs* were women who as children were dedicated to temples, thus becoming wives of the temple’s presiding god, trained to sing and dance for him. They were human embodiments of the *apsarās*, known for their beauty and musical talents (Marglin 1985: 91, 145). Though sexually active, they remained childless. The *devadāsīs* belonged to the god, but through them and through the ubiquitous images of *apsarās* in temples (see Desai 2000: 31–2), human men could glimpse the heavenly reward awaiting them if they were heroic in battle or in spiritual striving.

Since the gods do not die, *devadāsīs* could never become widows; they were *nityasumamgālī*, forever auspicious. As such, they could bestow their excess auspiciousness on others, and they participated in rituals focused on renewal, fertility, regeneration, and rebirth (Marglin 1985: 107–12).

## WOMEN AS TEMPTRESSES 2: BUDDHIST TALES

*Apsarās* were one of many aspects of South Asian culture and religious thought incorporated into the earliest Buddhist beliefs.<sup>15</sup> Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism rarely emphasizes individual *apsarās*; for the most part they are nameless,

often appearing in groups, which keeps them firmly in the background of male Buddhist experience, where they remain on call either to serve as expressions of female turpitude or to sing and dance for the spiritual victory of male saints, as when the Buddha achieved enlightenment (Figure 3.2).<sup>16</sup>

Buddhists who reach the state of enlightenment are considered heroic; they have won a great victory by conquering their passions and piercing the veil of illusion that traps all beings in this earthly realm. The Sanskrit word *vīra*, “hero,” describes both brave Hindu warriors as well as Buddhist men who achieve enlightenment; hence they share the hero’s reward of *apsarās*, though for different ends. Buddhist art and literature depict *apsarās* hovering over great Buddhist teachers when they preach, in which context the sexuality of *apsarās* is downplayed in favor of their general auspiciousness.

Seduction stories were as popular among Buddhists as among Hindus (Young 2004: 87–91),<sup>17</sup> and the Buddhists also used *apsarās* and human “seductresses.” The encounter between ascetic and seductress often serves as a literary device to highlight the ascetic’s control of his sexuality. Such stories also warn of the dangers sexuality poses to male spiritual power and define women as temptresses. Early Buddhist texts remained primarily under the control of monks committed to celibacy, among whom seduction stories proliferated.



FIGURE 3.2: Flying *Apsarā*. Japan, c. early eighteenth century. San Diego Museum of Art. Public domain.

Take, for example, the *Alambusā Jātaka* (c. first century BCE), a story told after one of the Buddha's monks was seduced by his former wife. The Buddha explained that in a previous life the monk was a great ascetic who threatened the power of Indra, who consequently ordered the beautiful *apsarā* Alambusā to seduce him. The monk spends three years with her, thinking it is only a day. Finally, he recalls his father's warning against women and recovers himself (Cowell [1895] 1973: no. 523). *Apsarās* thus have two contradictory roles in Buddhism: as celebrants in the victories of male Buddhist celibates and as threats to that celibacy.

According to early Buddhist tradition, the Buddha never shirked from using women as a teaching device (see, e.g., Young 2004 and Wilson 1996, both *passim*), as in the *Saundarānanda*, the sophisticated, beautifully written epic about the Buddha's half-brother Nanda, composed in the first century CE by Aśvaghōṣa, a learned Buddhist monk. The story revolves around the relationship of Nanda, who is madly in love with his beautiful wife, Sundarī. In an attempt to free Nanda from her charms, which are impeding his spiritual awakening, the Buddha flies with him to Indra's heaven. Once he sees the *apsarās*, Nanda completely forgets his wife and begs the Buddha to help him obtain them. The Buddha explains that they can be won only by strenuous austerities. This is, after all, Indra's heaven, to which spiritual heroes go upon death and where they receive *apsarās* as rewards. Nanda therefore devotes himself to ascetic practices to reach this heaven and those divine women. This being a Buddhist story, however, he slowly comes to understand that even heavenly pleasures are transitory. He retires into the forest, practices meditations, and achieves enlightenment (XVII).

*Jātaka* tales (c. first century BCE) on this topic were mainly told in response to visits by or longing for former wives. These previous life stories feature men escaping the snares of women (Cowell [1895] 1973: no. 423), being destroyed by women (nos. 13, 318), or simply succumbing to them (no. 526), and they are all suggestive of women's potential to have more power than men, something that was unthinkable to society in general.

## WOMEN AND POLLUTION

The foregoing tales must be understood within the widely held belief that a menstruating woman, through even the most casual physical contact, could pollute men, especially monks or high-caste males, as well as temples or other sacred places. Contact with a menstruating woman was believed to render a man incapable of communicating with the sacred, and might even lead to illness (Bennett 1983: 214–46; Smith 1992: 17–45). This theme also occurs in folktales, especially those involving black magic, which prizes the commanding power of menstrual blood, even the ashes of towels used by

women to absorb menstrual blood, and which finds the menstrual blood of widows and prostitutes (the latter being doubly polluted) to be particularly efficacious (Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1975: 347, 353). Tibetan love magic strongly expresses its power:

The easiest way in which a woman may gain the love of a man she desires is to burn one of her used monthly towels and to mix some of the ashes surreptitiously with the man's food or drink. Instead of the ashes she may also use a drop of menstruation blood. Or the woman may try to smear a little of her menstruation blood on the man's head. The resulting pollution (*grib*) will cause the man to lose his will-power so that he will readily comply with the wishes of the woman who charmed him.

(Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1975: 500)

Even contact with a woman's undergarments is polluting. In one famous Thai legend, Queen Camthewi sent a rival king a hat made from her underclothes; after he put it on she was able to vanquish him (Tanabe 1991: 189n12). In her study of purity and pollution, Mary Douglas has shown that both are fundamentally conceptions of order and disorder; that which causes pollution is "matter out of place" (1966). Thus, a menstruating woman is out of place within the sacred and contact with her can render men equally out of place.

In India the belief in women's pollution goes back at least to the Vedic period (c. 1200–800 BCE) and the myth that the god Indra, to purify himself from the pollution of murder, transferred one-third of his pollution to women and thus caused them to menstruate. This origin myth equates menstruation with the sin of murder and defines menses as polluting. Interestingly, Indra transferred the other two-thirds to the earth and trees, the earth being an important female deity and trees having a profound connection with female fecundity.<sup>18</sup> These connections provide important reminders that in ancient India women were, and can still be, perceived in two contradictory ways: as sexually threatening and polluted as well as being the bearers of manifold blessings through their auspicious powers as fertile women.

## SEXUAL APPETITE

South Asian folktales also describe women as utterly untrustworthy, fickle creatures whose voracious sexual appetites made them long to cheat on their husbands. Such tales perceive sexuality as both female and demonic, and dramatize the excessiveness of female sexuality by comparing it to the male monkey, since throughout South Asia monkeys are considered highly sexual. Popular Indian ideas about sexuality say that women are sexually eleven times stronger than men, a belief partially connected to the widespread notion that the loss of semen debilitates men. Much ink has been spilled about Indian



men's sexual anxieties and actual impotence, particularly in relation to their wives, who are described as sexually voracious.<sup>19</sup> A typical folktale of this sort concerns the bride who, during their wedding journey to the groom's home, left her unresponsive husband for a well-endowed monkey (Tull 1993).

In reality, men seem to fear female sexuality because of its unboundedness, not because of possible contact pollution. As in the story of the bride and the monkey, men believed women to be so unbridled in their lust that they would leave civilization behind, ignore caste restrictions, and even resort to animals. In contrast, they believed female pollution could be contained by isolating women and observed that menstruation was also cyclical and thus predictable—unlike women's sexual urges, which could erupt at any time.

Other stories that reveal deep-seated male fears about women's sexual powers as about losing masculinity include the many folktales about *vaginae dentatae* in which women seduce men to cut off their penises, thereby rendering men into women (see, e.g., Ellwin [1949] 1991: 373–87; O'Flaherty 1980: 93, 267). These stories describe men who fear their own sexual desires and who demonize its object: women. At the same time, the women in these stories are inevitably tamed by the loss of their vaginal teeth. In other words, they become sexually powerless and consequently deemed safe for heterosexual intercourse.

## THE INSTABILITY OF MASCULINITY

Masculinity encompasses a complex space, much of which clusters around two related but contending poles. First, and most obviously, one pole is hegemonic: patriarchal concepts privilege men with particular forms of power, notably within hierarchies of religious and secular power. At this pole, masculinity is stable. The other pole is more subtle, encapsulating as it does male fears that masculinity is fluid; that it can be diminished, and, even worse, that a man can be transformed into a woman. In two Buddhist tales from Japan, monks are changed into women, one by a dream and the other when his genitals fall off. Subsequently, both monks marry men and bear children (Faure 1998: 77–8n39). Seen in this light, denying women access to sacred places and positions of spiritual power goes beyond fears of female pollution or avoiding sexually distracting and voracious women. If women can weaken men's power, spiritual or otherwise, by seducing them and/or by polluting them, then they can also weaken their masculinity, causing them to drift toward femininity.<sup>20</sup> As Andrea Custodi describes it, "Masculinity is charged with a symbolic investment that is qualitatively different from that of femininity, and is constructed in a way that makes it more vulnerable to challenge and subversion" (2007: 208). Tales about women that depict them as sly and underhanded only intensify the need for male vigilance and weaken confidence in their masculinity.

Tales about the fluidity of sexual characteristics heighten male fears of losing their penises. One well-known Hindu tale comes from the great Indian epic, the

*Mahābhārata* (c. first to fourth centuries CE). In the story, the masterful warrior Arjuna and his brothers must choose disguises while in exile. Arjuna chooses to be a transvestite and later a eunuch (Hiltebeitel 1980: 147–74), but with the odd feminine name of *Brhannandā*, meaning “having a large reed”—an assertion of his masculine power even while in a non-masculine disguise (Van Buitenen 1973–8: 3:9). When Arjuna offers his services as a dance master to women, he refers to himself as a transvestite and says “I’ll be a woman” (29). To make sure he is not a man, King Virāṭa has Arjuna undergo a physical exam, which he passes (41; Custodi 2007: 211–16). Here we have a definitive warrior, the archetype of Hindu masculinity, slipping into an ambiguous gender (transvestism, here considered a third gender) and then into womanhood (Young 2004: 57–65, 111–13). The *Kāma Sūtra*, a text compiled in the fourth century CE by incorporating much earlier works (Daniélou 1994: 3–4), introduces people of “the third nature,” often taken to mean a third sex (*tritīya prakṛiti*; 183), such as hermaphrodites, transvestites, and homosexual prostitutes.

The sexual ambivalence of the god Śiva, both as the great celibate ascetic and the virile husband (particularly in his *ardhanārīśvara* form of “the Lord who is half-man/half-woman”) and via the legend of his self-castration, unites in his person the conflict between spiritual power and sexuality (Hiltebeitel 1980: 147–74; O’Flaherty 1975). He gains great power by his austerities but at other times is sexually active. He alone of the gods is often symbolically represented as a *lingam*, a penis, symbolic of masculinity and generative power. Such specific valorization of the penis points to a lingering anxiety about the stability of masculinity in South Asia.

That Buddhists shared this conflict between spiritual power and sexuality in emphasizing celibacy is shown in tales proving the Buddha’s virility while he was still a layman. The Buddha’s penis and its ability to function or not was a subject of some interest to Buddhists. The textual discussion centers on the thirty-two physical marks of the Buddha, which include a sheathed or hidden penis (*kośopagatavastiguhyo*; Desai 1997: 52; Young 2004: 71), in other words, a penis that was not readily discernible. Buddhist oral storytelling has exhibited a fluidity that endures to this day in the discourses of Buddhist monks at pilgrimage sites, but versions of many stories also were eventually frozen into the texts we now have, dating mostly to the first century CE. When ancient authors compared the many statues of Buddha without a prominent penis to statues of various male beings with penises, some explanation was required. Hence *kośopagatavastiguhyo* became a special feature of all buddhas; they have a penis, but one that is sheathed, hidden from view.

Overall, Buddhists did not reject the masculine ideal of the warrior. Rather, they redefined it. The earliest stories about the Buddha say that as a prince he trained in the manly arts of war. A frequent epithet for the Buddha is *vīra*, a hero, a term also used for the Hindu gods Indra and Śiva as well as for great



warriors or ascetics. All accomplished Buddhist ascetics are *vīras*, but they surpass the accomplishments of worldly warriors in their asceticism, especially celibacy.

Penis anxiety does not end here. Buddhist literature contains many sex-change stories that occur not through rebirth but within one lifetime (Young 2004: 191–210). While most describe changes from female to male, they are nonetheless more expressive of male fears about losing masculinity than of female hopes about gaining it. Tales about sex change frequently reflect culturally perceived notions of prestige associated with gender (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 13–24). In stories where women change into or disguise themselves as men they become heroic, but stories about men becoming women often lead to their powerlessness and humiliation. Both types appear in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, a religious text composed in Sanskrit between the first century BCE and second century CE. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* was an extremely popular text and, consequently, widely translated. The work contains a dialogue between the celestial bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and the human bodhisattva Vimalakīrti about the illusory nature of all beings, human and otherwise, and the attitude a bodhisattva should take toward these illusory beings.<sup>21</sup> An unnamed goddess interrupts the discussion, expressing her delight at their discourse by causing flowers to rain down. The flowers fall off the robes of the bodhisattvas but stick to the robes of those still mired in illusion. Representing an earlier doctrine of Buddhism, the monk Śariputra has also been listening to the discourse, cannot get the flowers off his robe, and enters into an argument with the goddess, culminating with his challenging her to change her female form. The goddess complies, but with a twist; she simultaneously changes herself to male and Śariputra to female. In one stroke, she neatly both dramatizes the chapter's theme of the illusory nature of all beings and negates any idea that the female gender precludes spiritual achievement. After she restores their original forms, Vimalakīrti explains to the humiliated Śariputra that she has attained irreversibility; in other words, she will achieve buddhahood (Thurman 1976: 56–63).

The biography of Upagupta, the Buddhist monk and master of *siddhis* (supernatural power), who was the Buddhist emperor Aśoka's guru, provides many examples of his skillful teaching of Buddhism—examples that frequently involve *siddhis*. In two of these he shape-shifts into a woman. The first time, he became a woman to help a monk who kept thinking of his former wife while trying to meditate. Upagupta appeared before him in the form of his wife, shocking the monk into realizing his attachment to her. Upagupta then resumed his male form and preached to the monk to help him overcome his attachment to her (Strong 1992: 127). The second time, Upagupta wished to undo a monk's false sense of detachment, and did so by taking on the form of a drowning woman. The monk pulled “her” out of the river, but then felt desire and took her to an isolated spot, only to discover she was Upagupta (132).

These two instances of sex change demonstrate Upagupta's advanced spiritual powers. Because of their short duration, the transformations in no way undercut his masculine authority. In fact, by emphasizing the threat women pose to monks, these incidents help monks preserve their celibacy by maintaining their distance from women. This is why, in tales about women who change sex, once they become men they inevitably choose to remain male—the normative Buddhist body.

These and similar stories reveal a primary South Asian belief that sexual characteristics remain fluid; genitals can change in the next lifetime or even in this one.<sup>22</sup> In other words, sexual characteristics can drift. That the belief in sex change was enduring and widespread is shown by the surprising number of extant sex-change stories, their incorporation into not only folktales but also prominent Buddhist texts, and their presence within discussions of significant Buddhist concepts such as karma and illusion.

As mentioned, most sex-change stories—whether from male to female or female to male—are more expressive of male fears about losing masculinity than of female hopes of gaining it. In researching Afghan folktales about women changing into or disguising themselves as men, Margaret Mills found that they are usually told by men, not women (1985: 187–213). In other words, even though the stories feature women, they reveal male concerns. This is equally true of the stories under discussion here, which were told by men and preserved in texts controlled by men. These stories represent male views, anxieties, and fantasies. Although a few stories subvert the wholesale negation of women and challenge the basic notion of gender, overall, they privilege maleness. Most tellingly, the vast majority of stories show women becoming men rather than the reverse. Other stories also privilege maleness and indicate that gender is fixed. In the many tales about the Buddha's previous lives, an individual's sexual characteristics generally remain constant from life to life. In Buddhist folk culture, gender is understood to be a reward or a punishment for past actions, an idea also explored in many Buddhist texts that argue achieving an advanced stage of awareness precludes one from being reborn as a female.

A different view of female spiritual potential is upheld in the *Lotus Sūtra*, a well-known Buddhist text. In it the bodhisattva suppliant asks Mañjuśrī if there is anyone capable of achieving perfect enlightenment, and he answers yes: the eight-year-old daughter of Sāgara, king of the nāgas (half-serpent, half-human aquatic beings said to possess great wealth).<sup>23</sup> Śāriputra, once more the fall guy, challenges the spiritual accomplishments of Sāgara's daughter, arguing that no woman has reached buddhahood. When Sāgara's daughter magically transforms herself into a male, she silences Śāriputra, yet also confirms his views because her vagina vanishes and is replaced by a penis, and she is seen by all as a male bodhisattva preaching in a Buddhist heaven (Kern [1884] 1963: 250–4). Unlike the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, this *sūtra* strongly suggests one must be male to

become a Buddha. Such stories are about not just sex change but also spiritual power. Their cumulative effect stresses that being male is far preferable to being female (Young 2004: 191–201).

### RĀMĀYAṆA: FEMALE VS. MALE READINGS

The much-loved Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* manifests in myriad forms from oral to written to broadcasting and the internet, spinning an adventure tale about the ideal relationship between husband and wife. Although often understood solely as a Hindu tale, it also entranced Buddhists and Jains who produced their own versions as it spread across South Asia and into Southeast Asia.<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, Vālmīki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* (c. second century BCE) is considered the earliest written version of an even more ancient tale.<sup>25</sup>

The poem tells the story of Rāma, an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu and the ideal Indian concept of manhood in his adherence to the rules of *dharma* (duty), and his beloved wife Sītā, the ideal woman, born of the earth goddess, who is abducted by the demon-king Rāvaṇa. The epic centers on Rāma's search for her and the war it provokes—a war of good versus evil, complete with animal helpers, especially the monkey king Hanumān, widely worshipped throughout India as a god in his own right. Early in the epic Rāma's forced exile stresses the correct roles of women, as he argues with both his mother and Sītā when they insist on accompanying him. He says his mother cannot come with him because her first duty is to her husband, adding that the husband is the wife's god and master; through obedience to him she will attain heaven (bk. 2, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 24). Later, Sītā argues that it is her duty to accompany her husband, her only means to salvation (bk. 2, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 27), a theme repeated throughout the epic. Rāma agrees. After Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, then rescued by Rāma, he surrenders to the opinion of others and says that as a captive she must have had intercourse with Rāvaṇa, so he sets her free to go where she will. Underlying this episode is the deep South Asian suspicion of women's sexuality when unchecked by male control. Sītā defends her honor and accuses Rāma of being unworthy of her, but, seeing that he will not relent, says she will undergo the ordeal by fire and throws herself onto a flaming pyre. The gods save her, thereby proving her innocence, and Rāma says it was only because people would doubt her that he wanted her to publicly prove her innocence. He then takes her back as his wife (bk. 6, *Yuddhakāṇḍa* 116–20) (Figure 3.3).

Yet rumors persist, and Rāma again banishes the now pregnant Sītā, who gives birth to twin boys in the forest. Once more the gods intervene to prove Sita innocent, but she has had enough and makes “an act of truth,” swearing that *if* she *never*, even in thought, dwelled on another man *then* may her earth mother receive her—and she sinks into the earth never to return. Rāma is desolate at her loss and ascends into heaven (bk. 7, *Uttarakāṇḍa* 43–9, 95–7, and 110).

Many of the values in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, especially those of gender, are challenged in twentieth- and twenty-first-century regional oral versions told mostly by women. Normative concepts of gender vary from one community to another (defined by religion, caste, class), and can be challenged by the teller (male or female) and by the place (domestic or public) because of gender roles that physically separate women and men. In Muslim areas of North India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, *purdah* (female seclusion) defines the work each gender performs, their ritual activities and their leisure. Generally, most South Asian women do not sing or tell stories when adult men are present. Consequently, the types of story differ according to the teller's gender: men prefer to tell or sing epics about heroes and war, while women usually relate stories associated with rituals to gain a desired end, such as the birth of a son. Women's tales reflect their social reality, focusing on family relations and household prosperity, emphasizing the crucial role of women in the latter. They have their own genres: songs of childbirth, songs associated with weddings, and rituals to protect and cure their households, such as putting kohl on babies' eyes



FIGURE 3.3: Rāma and Sītā in Ayodha after the war. Illustration by Warwick Goble, *Indian Myth and Legend* (1913). Public domain.

to ward off the *buri nazar* (evil eye). In contrast, men's tales emphasize political rather than household themes.

Discomfort with the role of Sītā creates challenges to Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* both mild and intense. For instance, the last book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which contains Sītā's act of truth, is problematized by some scholars who claim it is a later addition. Kampan (twelfth century), in his South Indian version, the *Irāmāyartāram*, does not include this episode, instead idealizing Rāma and Sītā's relationship, making Sītā's ordeal by fire even more remarkable (Shulman [1991] 1994: 89–113). Even today the women of Andhra Pradesh in South Central India sing *Rāmāyaṇa* songs in their native Telugu language that subvert gender roles. We cannot gauge the exact age for these songs, but they reflect the concerns of the women who sing them, not those of men, as in one song that dwells on the painful labor of Rāma's mother (Rao [1991] 1994: 119). Rāma's elder sister is a minor character in Vālmiki, but features prominently in women's songs. In Brahmin (the highest caste) families, an elder sister is allowed to criticize Rāma. The women's songs depict her as supportive of Sītā. The songs also undercut the disappointment of a female firstborn; rather, in these songs a firstborn girl brings prosperity to the family and leads to the birth of sons. Rao also analyzes the songs of low-caste women, which subvert the authority of the caste system rather than gender, as when they sing of the glories of Lanka, where Sītā is held captive. In their Lanka the gods, not the lower castes, are slaves (131). Since women of lower castes have fewer restrictions and thus greater freedoms than high-caste women, gender is not viewed as oppressive as the caste system.

## WOMEN, WITCHCRAFT, AND MAGIC

Since men are granted spiritual power, often connected to their celibacy, malevolent power is relegated to women and often tied to their sexuality. In India, the earliest records of witchcraft and magic appear in the *Vedas*, particularly the *Artharva Veda*. Traditionally, women have been excluded from studying the *Vedas*, which introduces a gender distinction as well as one of specialization: men are sorcerers who can work harm through their training under a guru who introduces them to the spells contained in the *Artharva Veda* and other texts, while women are witches who can work harm through their own innate powers or learning orally from other witches.

In South, Southeast, and many parts of East Asia witches are inevitably believed to be women.<sup>26</sup> Current folklore dating back to much earlier times offers many justifications for this belief: women are morally weak and therefore susceptible to the temptation of using magic to harm others (Gellner 1994: 39), witchcraft exists latently in all women,<sup>27</sup> and women harbor deeper grudges than men (Yoshida 1967: 252). These beliefs are spread by stories and discussions



about female witches, where distinctions among spells, magic, evil spirits, and witchcraft are blurred (Levine 1982: 259). The only consistency is that women can be or do any of the above. In northern India, evil spirits are believed to possess young, married women and to eat the livers of children, thereby causing miscarriages or the deaths of young children. Male priests exorcise the possessed women through beatings and by cajoling the witch to leave her victim (Gold 1988a: 181). The witch is seen as a woman who “follows her own wishes” rather than those of her husband (Herrmann-Pfandt 1996: 61).

The following story explains the belief that witches are normally female. While the god Śiva was recounting all the wisdom of the world, his wife, the goddess Parvati, fell asleep. She woke up with a start, however, when he reached the section on black magic (*kuvidy*) (Gellner 1992: 331),<sup>28</sup> suggesting that this was the only wisdom of interest to her, and by association, all women. This myth also points to the connection of Tantric forms of Hinduism and Buddhism with magic and witchcraft, especially Shaktism,<sup>29</sup> the sect surrounding the foundational energy of the universe deified as the goddess Śakti, often identified as the consort of Śiva. Female Tantric practitioners, known as *ḍākinīs* and *yoginīs*, participated in secret nighttime rituals, sometimes in cemeteries, during which they ingested polluting substances such as meat and alcohol, and occasionally blood (Young 2018: 134–44). Witches are also believed to congregate in secret, at night, in cemeteries, where they consume the blood and flesh of the dead and dance nude with loose hair (Roy 1929: 193; see also Babb 1975: 148, 203–5; Levine 1982: 263; Thaliath 1949: 892; and Tawney [1925] 1968: 2:98–9). Since witches are female they are confused with female Tantric practitioners, particularly *ḍākinīs*—so much so that in Nepali *ḍākinī* can mean “witch,” while in Orissa, famous for its witches, the word is *dahani*, a corruption of *ḍākinī*. Complicating matters further, some female *tantrikas* were and are active sorceresses (Denton 1992: 226–7).

A story from the Indian folktale collection *Kathasaritsagara*, compiled by the author Somadeva (eleventh century CE), in many ways duplicates Tantric rituals and plays on the theme that all women are potential or secret witches. These tales are based on an earlier collection (c. first century CE), now lost (Winternitz [1927] 1977: 3:346–50). In the story, a shocked husband discovers his wife sitting naked, engaged in a dark ritual that included eating human flesh, which is believed to bestow the power of flight. She explains that she learned witchcraft from another woman, but because she is devoted to her husband, she is more powerful than the other woman. She asks him to join in the ritual to become the most powerful king of all. Although initially disgusted, because of his sexual desire for her he soon participates in the cannibalistic feast. They instruct the cook to kill the first person to ask that food be prepared for the king and queen. Because witches must be punished, the tale continues by having their son make the request, and the cook kills him and serves him to his unknowing

parents. In the end, though, the king repents and surrenders his throne, thereby demonstrating male superiority over women's darkness. Then he and his wife enter their funeral fire and die to atone for practicing the ritual (Tawney [1925] 1968: 2:98–115).

G. Morris Carstairs summarizes Hindu beliefs about the connection between women and witches: "Sexual love is considered the keenest pleasure known to the senses: but it is felt to be destructive to a man's physical and spiritual well-being. Women are powerful, demanding, seductive—and ultimately destructive ... because *any* woman whose demands one has refused is liable to be feared as a witch who may exact terrible reprisals" ([1957] 1961: 156–7; see also Carstairs 1983: 91–2; Gold 1988a: 181–6; 1988b: 47–61). Today, Indians widely believe that witches test their budding powers by acting first against their husbands (Levine 1982: 264; Crooke [1896] 1968: 2:264–5).<sup>30</sup> A marriage hymn from the *Rig Veda* reflects this belief, saying that the blood of defloration becomes a dangerous female spirit, "a witch who binds the husband and makes his body ugly and sinisterly pale" (O'Flaherty 1980: 20). This thinking may be fortified by fears of menstrual pollution that require the seclusion of menstruating women. The witch, too, is said to seclude herself in a dark room, but she is thought to drink the blood of those she wants to harm (Carstairs [1957] 1961: 73).

## THE MALE PROTECTOR

Since witches often afflict animals and people with illness and/or possession, religious specialists, almost always male, attempt to cure these maladies with rituals that reverse the witch's attack (Babb 1975: 200, 203; Spiro 1996: 26), indicating belief that the ancient perfidious nature of women can be controlled only by men. A popular North Indian folktale, going back to perhaps the fifth century CE, concerns the legendary King Gopi Chand, who pits male yogic power against female magical powers (*Jādūgāriyām*). Against his will, King Gopi Chand had to become a yogi, a celibate ascetic. As the story begins, he learns from his mother that she was only able to have a son as a boon won through her asceticism and on the condition that, at age twenty-four, he must become a yogi or die. Specifically, he must relinquish his wives and slave women; he must abandon his pleasure in women and become celibate, which will make him more powerful than a sexually active male. In the South Asian religious context, all worldly pleasure is caused by illusion, or *māyā*, a cosmic female force often personified as a goddess. *Māyā* is also the source of magical power which can be manipulated both by male yogis and female witches, though women are thought to use the power negatively, for example by tormenting holy men such as Gopi Chand. In this and in many other Indian stories the entanglements of *māyā* are represented by women, especially sexually desirable women such as Gopi's wives and slave women.



Shortly after becoming a yogi, Gopi Chand decides to visit his sister, who is married to the king of Bengal, a northeastern Indian province frequently associated with dangerous and unorthodox practices—especially those involving witches and magic. Gopi Chand's guru, Jalindar, warns him that in Bengal there are seven powerful female magicians who deny all yogis passage through the region. Naturally, he goes anyway, and the female magicians challenge him to a magical contest even though he is a very inexperienced yogi. He loses, and they transform him into different kinds of animals, including a parrot and an ox, forced to work at low-caste occupations. Many male yogis are sent to battle them, but all fail until Jalindar shows up and turns everyone into donkeys. Both the yogis and the witches have magical powers, with advanced male yogis being the most powerful. The queen, Gopi Chand's sister, resolves the situation by requiring a vow from *all* Bengalis that they will no longer have magical contests with yogis.<sup>31</sup>

East Asia has similar stories of malevolent female spirits, especially fox spirits. Foxes have an ancient and complex mythology in East Asia. First, they may be messengers of the benevolent rice goddess Inari ("fox-spirit"), widely worshipped throughout Japan as a fertility deity (De Visser 1908: 129–44; Smyers 1999: *passim*). Second, they are skilled in taking human forms who possess people, sometimes making them ill or driving them mad (Casal 1959: 31–44; De Visser 1908: 62–3, 86–7, 88–90). Consequently, foxes have a dual nature of divine benevolence and demonic possession and thus can be an auspicious or evil omen (De Visser 1908: 12–19). There are also hereditary witch families who transmit power over foxes exclusively through the female line (Blacker 1986: 51–68; Casal 1959: 20–2).

From as early as the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE), foxes were believed to change themselves into beautiful women to seduce men (Figure 3.4). This inevitably led to the man's destruction, as recounted in one tale said to have occurred during the Shang Dynasty, which, according to legend, was destroyed in 1122 BCE because the fox spirit Tah Fei seduced King Cheu (De Visser 1908: 8). Similarly, the Western Chou Dynasty was allegedly ruined in 781 BCE by a fox spirit who became the favorite concubine of Emperor Yiu. They succeed by giving the men they seduce advice that leads to their downfall.

The sixteenth-century Chinese writer Sié Chao-Chi explains that foxes enchant men to take their vital spirit and transfer it to themselves. They do not enchant women because the fox is an animal associated with the principle *yin* (female), and only he who has the principle *yang* (male) is liable to be enchanted by them (De Visser 1908: 10; Smyers 1999: 128). But women who become fox spirits can be defeated by male religious experts (De Visser 1908: *passim*). Such is the case in one of the earliest recorded Japanese fox legends, dating from the ninth century. In the story, a retired regional governor disappeared. His relatives searched for him everywhere and finally vowed to make a wooden



FIGURE 3.4: A man confronted with an apparition of the Fox goddess. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861). Public domain.

statue of the Buddhist deity Kuan Yin that was the same size as the missing official. He then reappeared, but was very pale and ill. He explained that a girl had brought him love letters from a princess, to which he had replied. The girl then brought a carriage with horses that took him to a fabulous palace, where he lived very happily for three years with the princess, even having a son by her. But then a Buddhist priest appeared and shook a stick at everyone, causing them to flee. The priest pushed the governor out of the room and he came out at his home, where he had lain exchanted for thirteen days. Characteristically, fox spirits, like various supernatural creatures in folktales from around the world, are able to bend time, making what in real time was thirteen days seem to be three years. And, once again, a male ascetic overcomes a malevolent female spirit (Smyers 1999: 128).<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Asia in general, and South Asia in particular, have rich folklore traditions that reveal enduring concepts about gender and sexuality, though, as we have seen, the gender, caste, and class of the storyteller can overturn master narratives. For the most part, females are presented as undependable; women can shape-shift from and into animals (swans and foxes), goddesses, and witches. Being is fluid in ancient South Asia: animals, divinities, and humans may not be what they appear to be. Their nature is deceptive and a snare for men. The voracious sexuality of women contrasts sharply with the vulnerability of masculinity—as if women are the repository of sexuality and most things evil, which would seem to justify their subjugation by virtuous men. All of this contradicts texts such as the *Kāma Sūtra* that celebrate sexuality, as well as contradicting the proliferation of voluptuous women and goddesses in iconography. It does, however, speak to male anxieties about the potential to decline in masculinity, figuratively being swallowed up in women's eroticism, and literally by being changed into a woman, a real possibility in a world where gender is fluid, femaleness is powerful, and maleness is mutable.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# Humans and Non-Humans

### *The Animal in Greek and Roman Fable*

KENNETH KITCHELL

If you ask the average, well-educated person about Aesop, the answer will likely run something like this: “Aesop was a Greek slave who wrote fables about animals.” Much of this popular thinking is correct, but quite inadequate.

It is difficult to point to any hard facts concerning the life of Aesop.<sup>1</sup> Several versions of a fairly lengthy life of Aesop exist, referred to collectively by the Latin term *Vita*, but these were composed long after his death, and the authenticity of some of their facts is hard to determine. The fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus dates him to the sixth century BCE and tells us he was born in Thrace but lived on Samos as the slave of a man named Iadmon (2.134–5). Other sources say he was Phrygian by birth. It was commonly believed that he was physically deformed—short, hunchback, flat-footed, bow-legged—and mute until healed by the Egyptian goddess Isis. Known for his sharp tongue and quick wit, he supposedly consorted with kings, gaining an international reputation for insight and, eventually, his freedom, but was killed by the people of Delphi, who were insulted by his jibes against them. He apparently brought the genre of fable to the West from its birthplace in the near East, but none of his original writings remain. Instead, we must rely on later authors and sources for a sense of what may have been his original work. His beast fables comprise one of the best-known examples of ancient folklore, and here I study them in some depth to see what the animals themselves can tell us directly about the ancients. But it is best to begin by defining the genre, a task that is a bit harder than it first appears.

Gert-Jan van Dijk undertook a full study of the terms used in antiquity for what we call “fable” (1997), and what follows is but a slight indication of the complexity of the terms involved in both Greek and Latin. The oldest Greek term, used in the archaic age but never in classical times, is *ainos* (Kurke 2011: 43). A certain Lucillius of Tarrha differentiated *ainos* from *paroimia* (proverb), saying that fable is a *logos mythikos* (fictional tale) performed by speechless animals or plants for the sake of humans. By the fifth century BCE the most common usage was *logos*, with meanings ranging from “word” to “story.” Later, Theon, a Hellenistic author of a handbook of rhetorical skills, says, “*Logos* is a false/fictitious tale depicting a truth” (Perry 1965: xix–xx). The final Greek term often used for “fable” is *mythos* (“word,” “story”), which, according to Kurke (2011: 43), was used interchangeably with *logos* throughout the fourth century BCE. For example, Philostratus (second/third century CE), speaks of Aesop both as a *mythologos* and a *logopoios* (“*mythos*-creator” and “*logos*-creator,” *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.2).

The usual Latin word for a fable is the rather fluid term *fabula*, along with its derivative *fabella*. The word’s root (*fa-*) simply denotes talking, and covers a wide variety of tale. The first-century CE rhetorician Quintilian, for example, calls the Orestes story a *poetica fabula* and then immediately speaks of *fabulae* that are best known as being Aesop’s and that usually persuade the minds of rustics and the naïve (5.11.18–19). He encourages very young students to learn *fabellae* (1.9.1),<sup>2</sup> adding that “The Greeks speak of Aesopic and Libyan stories (*logoî*) while some Roman writers use *apologatio* (‘apologue,’ or moral fable), though it is not in common use” (3.11.19–21). He notes that a *paroimia* is a short, allegorical *fabella*. The first-century CE Latin fabulist Phaedrus uses *fabella* to refer to his stories in his prologues to books 2 and 3.

In addition to having varied names, Greek and Roman fables took many forms, ranging from simple, often crude jokes to mini-stories. But, generally, we can define them by several common characteristics: they are very short stories, written in prose or poetry, which, not unlike parables, aim at teaching a lesson, often by using animals as an allegory for human behavior. While oral fable must have existed well before the invention of writing, the earliest literary example comes from the Greek poet Hesiod who, in his *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE) offers a fable (*ainos*) for kings known as the fable of “The Nightingale and the Hawk” (202–12): a nightingale, captured by a hawk, complains bitterly about it, but the hawk simply tells the nightingale that it is foolish for the weak to contend with the mighty. Hesiod relates this for his brother Perses, whom Hesiod wishes to dissuade from unjust deeds by showing him how power can lead to injustice. A later fable about the man who owned a goose that laid a golden egg each day lives on in the modern saying “Don’t kill the goose that lays the golden eggs” (G 434).<sup>3</sup> The foolish man cut open the goose, wanting to find all the eggs inside and, in so doing, stopped his supply of wealth.<sup>4</sup> Avianus, whose Latin



fables appeared circa 400 CE, tells us the moral of this story is that the gods will not listen to the wishes of one who asks them for everything all at once (33). Such morals can be merely implied or stated plainly, either before the story, as a *promythium* (“fore-story,” indicating “The following story shows that ...”), or, more commonly, after the fact as an *epimythium* (“after-story,” indicating “This fable has shown that ...”). Thus, whatever they were called and in whatever form they were created, all fables either offer what ancient rhetoricians called a *paradeigma* in Greek or an *exemplum* in Latin—what we might call a “concrete lesson.”

## SETTING THE BACKGROUND

First, it is well established that the genre of fables existed long before it was adopted by Greek and Roman authors. Fables appear on numerous clay tablets from various Mesopotamian cultures, some dating as far back as the seventeenth century BCE (Perry 1965: xxviii–xxxiv). Moreover, some Greek fables can be traced directly back to Mesopotamian prototypes (Williams 1956). This fact was inherently understood by the ancient Greeks and Romans, for, although they acknowledge Aesop as the master of the genre, they also describe several other types of fable: Libyan, Egyptian, Carian, Cypriote, Lydian, Phrygian, Cilician, and Sybarite (Holzberg 2002: 16). The first seven locations were once under Mesopotamian rule; only Sybaris, in southern Italy, associates fable with the western Mediterranean.

Most modern scholars agree with the ancient Greeks who named Aesop as the Western founder of the genre. As stated above, he was probably born in Thrace but spent time as a slave on the island of Samos, which would have brought him into contact with stories from Mesopotamian lands.<sup>5</sup> Also as mentioned above, we have no actual writings by Aesop; none of his original texts have survived. Rather, the fables we have in what is called the “Aesopic tradition” have come down to us in three basic streams.<sup>6</sup> In the first kind, in literature a fable can be told at length or simply alluded to as we do in English when we advise someone not to “cry wolf” too often, or say someone’s dismissive attitude toward a failed attempt is a case of “sour grapes.”<sup>7</sup>

The second stream consists of ancient fable collections, as opposed to individual tellings. Such collections seem to have been a relatively late development, with the earliest known being a now-lost compilation by Demetrius of Phaleron (350–280 BCE) who apparently collected and arranged the fables in such a way as to facilitate their use by authors and rhetoricians (see Kurke 2011: chs. 7 and 8). The fable books best known to us today are those of Phaedrus (Ph) and Babrius (B), both of whom sought to elevate the genre into the realm of literature. Gaius Iulius Phaedrus was born in Thrace c. 15 BCE. Like Aesop, he was once a slave, but moved to Rome and became a freedman under the



Emperor Augustus.<sup>8</sup> We have five books of his Latin fables, written in verse, but this represents only a sampling of his output. Later prose summaries, such as those by Niccolo Perrotti (fifteenth century), attest to poems that have not survived. We know even less about Babrius, who probably lived in the second century CE and produced an immense collection of Greek fables in verse, of which only 144 survive. Two centuries later, Avianus (Av) produced forty-two Latin fables in elegiac verse, largely based on Babrius's work.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, fables also appear individually in many prose works. One main source is *The Aesop Romance*, or *Life of Aesop*—the abovementioned *Vita*—a fictionalized biography passed down through manuscripts dating from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries CE. Other fables are found in an assortment of later collections, such as the *Collectio Augustana* (named from its earliest manuscript, preserving fables based on a lost Greek original of uncertain date) and *Aesopus Latinus* (fourth century CE). We have many other sources of “Aesop’s” fables, ranging from papyrological finds to collections of Byzantine-era fables; an exhaustive discussion of sources is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, what I present here is just enough to give the reader an appropriate sense of our sources and their range, both literary and chronological.

The following concrete example helps demonstrate the complex nature of the Aesopic tradition: Some travelers take rest beneath the shade of a plane tree. Resting, they look up at the tree and comment that it is really a rather useless thing since it produces no fruit. The tree objects to their ingratitude, since it offers shade to one and all (P 175). This anonymous fable, from the prose compilation tradition, appears in six manuscripts ranging from the tenth to fifteenth centuries CE. One would be justified in doubting any attribution to Aesop or the classical Aesopic tradition. But according to the Greek biographer Plutarch (c. 46–120 CE), the fifth-century BCE general Themistocles used the story when he said he was like a plane tree that no one appreciated (*Life of Themistocles* 18)—indicating a relatively early date for the fable.

Finally, the numbering system for ancient Aesopic fables is, to put it mildly, a hodgepodge. Over the years, individual editors gathered fables from various sources for their own editions, each with its own numbering system. Today, when referring to specific Aesop’s fables, most people use the numbering system of Ben Perry, who collated and enlarged earlier collections. But people generally do not have access to his book which, in any event, provides no translations. Laura Gibbs offers six hundred fables in English, some of which are not in Perry, and includes very clear charts providing equivalencies between her numbers and those of other collections, including Perry’s. Therefore, I use her numeration, for example, G 234, whenever possible, and the abbreviations Ph(aedrus), B(abrius), P(erry), or V(ita) when a fable does not appear in Gibbs. Full number equivalencies, as well as Greek and Latin texts, are readily available at her impressive website.<sup>10</sup>

THE NON-HUMAN IN FABLE

As mentioned above, one main characteristic of fables is the vast scope and variety of the “non-human” presence in them. “Non-human” includes many things, ranging from deities to animals to inanimate objects. What sort of non-human elements appear in fables, and how frequently? How do these agents interact with each other and humans? Who speaks and to whom? Answers to such questions may tell us something about the preferences of the ancients. In trying to answer, I confine my study to the works of Phaedrus and Babrius both to control the sheer number of fables discussed here and to keep the study firmly rooted in antiquity.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in identifying and analyzing various themes that come to light, I use evidence from throughout the Aesopic tradition, but avoid medieval and later sources.

A brief explanation for some of the statistics in this study: I use a total of 236 fables from Phaedrus and Babrius, excluding only a few entries that comprise literary musings rather than true “fables” (e.g., Ph 4.26). Also, when counting and categorizing one must make some decisions that are, perforce, arbitrary. Thus, instead of listing cow, bull, ox, and calf separately, I have lumped them into the single category of “Cattle.” Likewise, if a member of a category is only inferred or mentioned casually in a fable or is not an active participant, I do not count it. So, for example, the oxen in G 481 may be crucial to the story, but they serve only an ancillary role, just as the human corpse in G 375 is merely a prop.

I categorize non-human active agents in the fables as Divine, Human, Animal, Vegetable, Abstract, and Inanimate. Table 4.1 demonstrates the raw number of such participants in the 236 fables under consideration as well as the rounded percentage of the 236 fables this represents. The first thing such statistics do is demonstrate the misleading nature of Leslie Kurke’s statement that fables deal with many things and “(sometimes) animals” (2011: 43). Rather, the overwhelming majority of the fables clearly involve animals as active agents. In fact, while animals appear in three-quarters of the fables, humans appear just

TABLE 4.1 Active Non-Human Agents

Active Agent Type	Number	%
Animal in the Fable	173	75
No Animal in Fable	58	25
Divinity	28	12
Human	110	47
Human and Animal	64	27
Inanimate	5	2
Plant Active Agent	4	2

under half the time, and the two interact in the fables just over one-quarter of the time. Humans appear on the stage, but it is the animals' stage.

Nonetheless, a full quarter of the fables contain no animal at all. Divinities, humans, and animals act together in only one fable (G 350). Twelve fables involve only divinities and humans, and nine involve only divinities and animals.<sup>12</sup> Divinities, ranging from Olympians such as Zeus to lesser gods such as the North Wind, demi-gods like Hercules, and abstractions such as Hope, appear as the only active characters in seven fables.<sup>13</sup>

The vegetable world is alive in fable, if only rarely.<sup>14</sup> Fir trees quarrel with brambles and oaks with reeds (B 36, G 200–1), while nut and plane trees lament various injustices (G 40–2, 81–2). A fox and a bramble bush have a spat in G 306, an interesting corollary to Joel Chandler Harris's story of Bre'r Rabbit where the clever rabbit tricks the dimwitted fox into throwing him into the brambles by pretending he is afraid of them.<sup>15</sup>

Inanimate objects play a prominent role in six fables,<sup>16</sup> including one where an ox driver scolds his wagon for groaning under its load (G 225), and another in which an old lady who smells fragrant lees in a jar tells it that it must have held wonderful wine (G 572). The tale of "The Fox and the Grapes" has an animal addressing an inanimate object:<sup>17</sup>

Driven by hunger, a fox was trying to reach some grapes high on the vine. Although it leaped with all its might, it could not reach the grapes. As she went away, the fox remarked, "Oh, you aren't even ripe yet! I do not want to eat sour grapes."

[Epimythium] *Those who make light of things they cannot achieve should apply this instructive little story (exemplum) to themselves.*<sup>18</sup>

So famous was this fable in antiquity that a fox with grapes appears as a decoration on a shield held by a running nude warrior on a Greek painted cup (Figure 4.1).<sup>19</sup>

Examples of other non-human activity in fables include mountains groaning in labor (G 280),<sup>20</sup> and a trumpet begging its owner not to toss it onto a burning pyre (G 121).<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, an anthropomorphized lamp, drunk on its own oil, boasts that it is brighter than the morning star, only to be extinguished by a puff of wind; a man, standing nearby, mocks it for its pretensions (G 211).<sup>22</sup> In another fable, a file mocks the serpent that bites it (Phaedrus 4.8 = G 305, P 93).

What might such instances of "animated," speaking non-humans mean? Personification of objects is fairly common in the Greek world,<sup>23</sup> but in fable we are well advised not to search too deeply for existential meaning. The file just mentioned is not surely given a voice to imply any universal belief system to the reader. Rather, it is part of a world in which any object, however lowly it may be, is endowed with the power, and often the voice, to serve as a vehicle for the fabulist's main goal of using non-human objects to teach humans lessons about



FIGURE 4.1: A fox with grapes as a shield decoration. Greek cup fragment, c. 525–475 BCE. Attributed to the painter Skythes. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, with permission.

their lives. As we will see, this may be a leftover from the belief in a “Golden Age” when formal distinctions between objects were not as fixed.

## THE ANIMAL WORLD OF AESOPIC FABLES

Clearly, the world of the ancient fable is populated by a wide variety of non-human characters—animate, inanimate, and divine. But, as the numbers demonstrate, the vast majority of non-human actors in the fables are animals, and most have the power of speech. The types of animals themselves provide informative patterns as to their use in fable; Table 4.2 indicates my count of animals in the 236 fables of Babrius and Phaedrus used for this study.<sup>24</sup> Even a cursory glance at the numbers is informative. The top ten animals found in Babrius and Phaedrus, with their frequencies, are:

Cattle: 56	Ass: 16
Dog: 25	Sheep: 12
Fox: 24	Mouse: 10
Lion: 24	Monkey/Ape: 8
Wolf: 20	(Tie) Frog, Goat, Horse, Snake: 7 each

TABLE 4.2 Individual Animals Appearing in the 236 Fables

Animal	Number of Appearances
Ass	16
Bear	1
Bee	1
Boar	3
Camel	3
Cat <sup>25</sup>	4
Cattle/Bull/Ox/Cow	56
Chicken/Rooster	6
Cicada	2
Crab	2
Crane	5
Crocodile	1
Crow/Raven <sup>26</sup>	5
Deer/Stag	6
Dog	25
Dolphin	1
Dove	1
Eagle	6
Fish	3
Fly	3
Fox	24
Frog	7
Gnat	1
Goat	7
Hare	4
Hawk	2
Heron	1
Horse	7
Jackdaw	3
Jay	1
Kite	2
Lark	2
Lion	24

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Lizard	1
Monkey/Ape <sup>27</sup>	8
Mouse	10
Mule	3
Nightingale	1
Owl	1
Panther	1
Partridge	3
Peacock	3
Pig/Boar	4
Sea birds (3 sorts)	1
Sheep/Ewe/Lamb	12
Snake/Serpent/Viper	7
Sparrow	1
Starling	1
Stork	2
Swallow	4
Thrush	1
Toad	2
Turtle/Tortoise	2
Turtledove	1
Vulture	1
Weasel	6
Whale	1
Wolf	20

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By comparison, the six most commonly mentioned animals in our two earliest Greek authors Homer (famous for his animal similes) and Hesiod (writing concerning agricultural matters) are, in descending order, horse, cattle, pig, dog, goat, and sheep. The results are not surprising, for many of these animals had direct and frequent interactions with humans. Cattle, sheep, and goats were the most common herd animals in Greece and Rome, always in danger of being preyed upon by the wolf. The donkey was the hardest working farm animal, and the dog was omnipresent in city and country alike. Mice ran about in houses and other structures, and frogs were so well known that Aristophanes created a comic chorus of them (*Frogs*, 405 BCE). The horse

appears far more frequently on Greek vases than the dog, though less present in fables. But what of the lion? Thomas has demonstrated its presence in Greece during the Bronze Age (2004, 2014), but evidence for the classical period is slim, despite Herodotus (7.126) and Aristotle (*History of Animals* 579b, 606b) both placing the lion in northeastern Greece.<sup>28</sup> Its strong presence in Greek and Roman literature and art need not be more than a time-honored archetype. The lion was more familiar to the Romans than the Greeks due to its presence in publicly sponsored games. Might its appearance in early fables be partially due to the Near Eastern origin of the genre? The same may be true for tales such as “The Arab and his Camel” (G 560), or perhaps for the ape/monkey, though it became a popular pet in Roman times.

While a broad spectrum of animals appears in the fables, the numbers indicate clearly that familiar animals were considered better able to impart moral lessons than unusual ones. I know of only one fable, G 368, that contains a satyr, and can find no sphinxes, chimeras, centaurs, or other composite beings, despite the fact that excellent fables could have been created around them—such as tales warning against trying to be of two natures or dispositions at once.

Table 4.3 makes clear that mammals far outnumber any other type of animal in the fables, and that wild animals appear far more frequently than domesticated or tamed animals. I have tried to rely on context to determine if a camel, ass, or bull is domesticated or wild, but the context is often ambivalent. Cats, not very common until Roman times, were liminal, coming and going from a house as they wished, but I have counted them as domesticated. In Greece, most mousers were weasels, and thus liminal; I have tried to differentiate between these weasels, who serve a helpful household function, and those who are thoroughly wild. I count all mice as wild since

TABLE 4.3 Animals in the 236 Fables by Type

Animals	Domesticated	Wild	Total
Mammal	98	110	198
Bird (counting peacock as domesticated)	9	46	55
Reptiles and amphibians		20	20
Insect		10	10
Fish (presupposing that none mentioned are those cultivated in <i>piscinaria</i> , namely, fish ponds, and including whale and dolphin according to ancient belief)		5	5
Crustacean		2	2



they merely cohabit with humans and are no more domesticated than house sparrows. Even though feral and liminal dogs surely existed, all are considered domesticated here because in both real life and the fables they are completely integrated into human society.

Note that the raw numbers of an animal's appearance in fables do not necessarily reflect the frequency with which the ancients actually encountered them. The average Athenian swatted at flies and mosquitoes more times each day than he spotted a wolf. What accounts, then, for frequency of appearance? The numbers seem in line with common ideas of where the animals rank in a hierarchy of living beings based on the complexity of their physiology and behavior. A wolf is, at least in fables, of more interest and utility than a clam. Another determinant is the status animals hold within a group. Lions, wolves, and bulls are dominant mammals; eagles and hawks are dominant birds. On the other hand, while insects may be lowly in size, they make good comic relief when they torment larger animals (G 223, 582; B 84). Ants and bees serve as paragons of cooperative and effective social behavior, as in the well-known fable "The Ant and the Grasshopper"—"cricket" in the original:

During the wintertime, an ant was living off the grain that he had stored up for himself during the summer. The cricket came to the ant and asked him to share some of his grain. The ant said to the cricket, "And what were you doing all summer long, since you weren't gathering grain to eat?" The cricket replied, "Because I was busy singing I didn't have time for the harvest." The ant laughed at the cricket's reply, and hid his heaps of grain deeper in the ground. "Since you sang like a fool in the summer," said the ant, "you better be prepared to dance the winter away!"

[Epimythium] *This fable depicts lazy, careless people who indulge in foolish pastimes, and therefore lose out.*<sup>29</sup>

Here, the industrious ant lectures the cricket on the benefits of foresight and a solid work ethic.

A separate category of animal in the fables is at odds with the modern necessity for putting animals definitively in one category or another. When referring to them Aristotle uses the verb *epamphoterizein*, which usually translates as "to dualize" but more accurately means "to have parts or traits of two separate types of animal." For example, the seal breathes air and is viviparous but has fins and a lifestyle like that of a fish. A bat is like a mouse and a bird.<sup>30</sup> Gibbs devotes an entire section to the fables that treat the bat, ostrich, and hyena (which "dualizes" as male and female) (Gibbs 362–8).<sup>31</sup>

There further seems to be a preference concerning the number of animals that can play an active role in fable. Approximately twenty of the 236 fables studied are populated with five or more animals, usually those appearing in

flocks (B 3, 72), herds (G 512), schools (B 9), or swarms (G 178), or who are acting as a group to wage war (Ph 4.6) or to complain to or ask something from the gods (G 436). Ph 4.13 offers the anthropomorphic picture of a country run entirely by apes. Sixty-seven of the fables have only one animal and seventy-eight have two. Only sixteen have three animals and only five of them have four. Thus, as was true in Greek drama, fewer “actors” in a tale help keep the plot from becoming overly entangled.

Finally, it is worth considering what animals are *not* found in the fables. The shark was well known and certainly rapacious enough to serve as an oceanic parallel to the wolf or lion, yet it is missing. The octopus could have been an excellent example of tenacity and cleverness as in *Odyssey* 5.443–5, where Odysseus clings to a rock like an octopus; yet it too is absent. In fact, for a seagoing nation whose diet was heavy on seafood, sea creatures are, surprisingly, poorly represented in fables.

In sum, then, the entirety of the animal kingdom as the Greeks and Romans knew it is well represented, with a preference for mammals and for the alpha animals within various animal groups, but I detect no particular bias for wild or domesticated animals. Fable, it seems, found ways to teach using a wide spectrum of nature’s creatures.

## HUMAN AND ANIMAL INTERACTION IN THE FABLES

Nearly a third of the fables involve humans interacting with animals. Does the nature of such interactions tell us anything about ancient human-animal relations? Many of the relationships are quite normal. The fables show shepherds tending their flocks, farmers protecting their crops from birds, and humans quite naturally afraid of lions. But there are many unusual or unprecedented interactions that can only occur in fable-land. The first is the motif of animals helping humans, as in the tale of Cupid and Psyche from Apuleius’s second-century CE Roman novel *Metamorphoses*: ants help Psyche sort out a vast number of mixed seeds cast on the ground, doing so merely out of pity at the girl’s plight (6.9–10).<sup>32</sup>

Other tales have the animal return a favor done by a human. In the best-known such fable, G 69, a lion with something painful in its paw, such as a thorn, approaches a human for help, promising not to harm him.<sup>33</sup> The human removes the offending object and later is saved from death by this same lion. The human remains nameless in G 69, but later versions call him “Androcles.”<sup>34</sup> Variations on this popular motif appear frequently. For example, a mouse returns a lion’s favor (G 70) and an ant repays the help of a pigeon (G 71). Lest we become overly sentimental, the fables also remind us that not all animals return favors. A man thaws out a cold snake only to be bitten by it (G 440; cf. G 74–5). A dog bites a gardener who rescued it from

well (G 77),<sup>35</sup> and animals can be callous to one another: consider G 125–6, where ants refuse to share their food with other insects.

Never hesitant to discuss all aspects of ancient animals, the fables contain references to bestiality. One concerns soothsayers who consulted Aesop as to why sheep had produced lambs with human faces (G 317);<sup>36</sup> he promptly told them that if they did not want this to happen again, they had better get wives for the shepherds. Another tells of a witless girl who asked a man copulating with a mule what he was doing. He replied, “Putting some sense into her.” Predictably, she asked him to “put some sense” into her as well (G 575). Other tales are less crude: in one, a female weasel loved a boy, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, turned her into a woman. Unfortunately, during the wedding feast, she leaped up to chase a passing mouse, showing that “Nature had proved stronger than Love” (P 50, G 350; ATU 218). Likewise, a lion chastely fell in love with a young woman (G 355).<sup>37</sup>

### ANIMALS AS HUMANS: “THE GAP”

This brings us to the question of anthropomorphization. As Jeremy Lefkowitz points out, recent scholarship has moved us far beyond seeing the animals in fables merely as humans in animal guise (2014: 1). True, anytime we see a tale in which animals possess some human traits, there exists a degree of anthropomorphization. The question is one of proportion—the extent to which a fable paints its animals as human or as animal. Highly useful in this regard is the concept known as “the Gap.”

“The Gap” is the constant and ever-shifting line humans have drawn to separate us from and elevate us over our fellow animals. John Heath notes that Richard Sorabji has documented over three dozen such gaps posited in antiquity, including reason, laughter, religion, and deliberation.<sup>38</sup> Thomas Suddendorf offers a partial list of “the major claims about what makes our minds unique: language, foresight, mind reading, intelligence, culture, and morality” (2013: 13–14).<sup>39</sup> To this we can now add tool use, waging war, and true emotions.<sup>40</sup> One by one such lines have been proven false. Chimpanzees, for example, both use tools and wage war, and a current gap is the syntactical use of language.<sup>41</sup> What gaps do we see created or ignored in the world of fable?<sup>42</sup>

Next, it helps to look at the degree to which the Gap is stressed or ignored in some modern examples of literature whose main characters are animals: Joel Chandler Harris’s collected Uncle Remus tales (1881),<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh stories (1926–8), and Richard Adams’s *Watership Down* (1972)—to name just a few. Obviously, the animals in these books are a mixture of both worlds, neither entirely human nor entirely animal. But the extent to which one or the other set of characteristics predominates is illustrative.

The rabbits of *Watership Down* are a mixed creation. In the story, which tells of their search for a new home, they have human abilities such as planning, what we claim as human emotions, and the ability to overcome instinctual inclinations. But Adams is careful at the same time to paint them as four-legged, wild rabbits who dig their own burrows, fear water and roads, and speak their own language, “lapine.” He even explicitly stresses the danger in their becoming too human. Their encounters with humans, such as the destruction of their warren or their raid on the farm where tamed rabbits are caged by humans, are fraught with peril.<sup>44</sup> One warren they encounter is decidedly strange and dangerous precisely because the rabbits there have taken on human customs, such as mosaic art, dance, song, and even a form of architecture (Kitchell 1986: 18). In fact, the crux of the book (patterned largely on Vergil’s *Aeneid*) is the fact that the rabbits, while clearly heroic, perform their heroic deeds by surpassing their normal limits, and are quick at the end to return to their natural animal ways.

The other works I mention above are different. *The Wind in the Willows* tells how four woodland creatures—Mole, Rat, Toad, and Badger—meet and become friends. Grahame’s anthropomorphized animals wear clothes, carry lunch baskets, live in furnished dwellings, use money, ride boats, and drive cars, to name but a few instances of their human behavior. Pooh Bear and his friends, including Piglet, Rabbit, Kanga, and Roo, are almost as humanized, with placards and bell-pulls outside their dwellings, and chairs, tables, shelves, and beds inside. The animals in Harris’s tales—stories based on African American folktales from the South—are less blatantly human, but they nonetheless build human-type houses, have dinner parties with pots and utensils, plant gardens, and even use mirrors. Popular illustrations of all these books also show that most of the animal characters are imagined as bipedal.<sup>45</sup>

There are some such heavily anthropomorphized Greek and Roman fables, but they are in the minority. In G 99 a lion invites a bull to the feast following a sacrifice, but when he arrives, the bull sees no sacrificial object—but notices cooking pots and knives.<sup>46</sup> A dog builds a house in G 267, and in G 156 a fox and stork have reciprocal dinners and each serves the food on tableware the other cannot utilize. In G 489 a rooster uses cats as his litter-bearers, while in G 400 a donkey and a dog find and read a human’s sealed letter.

Other stories show animals doing things that are “human” while retaining their animal natures, and with no hints of bipedalism or the trappings of humanity. For example, some act as physicians, usually offering to tend to an animal that is normally their prey (G 309–13; B 120). Others take out loans (G 174). Animals engage in human social activities such as birthday parties and beauty contests (G 95–6, 253, 329). They are invited to gods’ weddings (G 135, B 24) and invite one another to dinner parties where the predator-prey model is suspended (G 19, 401–2).<sup>47</sup>

We turn now to politics and war. For Aristotle, animals such as humans, ants, and bees are *politika*: they live in organized societies. But some animals of fable also engage in other kinds of “political” activities. There are kings, both good and bad, most of which are elected by animals sitting in council (G 20, 22, 24). Apes in council debate building a city (G 447). They often go to court for justice (G 174–81); if that fails they seek it from the gods (G 20, 153, 155).<sup>48</sup> They employ rhetorical skills to bargain and plead with others for their lives, often successfully, sometimes in civilized debates (*Vita* G 99 = P 387; G 182–205). It was once believed that only humans engaged in the planning and execution of war,<sup>49</sup> yet Jane Goodall chronicled a bloody four-year war between two tribes of chimpanzees in Gombe (Goodall 1990: 114–29), and Aristotle frequently uses “war” (*polemos*, *polemia*) to indicate antipathy between various species (*Hist. an.* 608b). In fable, there are wars between dogs and wolves (G 3132, 60), wolves and sheep (*Vita* G 97 = P 153), hares and eagles (G 51), quadrupeds and birds (G 362–3). In the tradition of the pseudo-Homeric *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, fable offers the *Battle of the Mice and Weasels* (G 455; Ph 4.6).<sup>50</sup>

Both political and martial activities demand alliances, and quite a few examples, many of which would be impossible in the real world of nature, appear in the fables. An onager (a type of Asian ass) and a lion cooperate in hunting (B 67), as do a fox, ass, and lion (G 145). Other impossible, often humorous alliances include: dolphin and lion (G 55); lion, cow, nanny goat, sheep, and lion (G 14); snake and crab (G 141); dung beetle and eagle (G 153); and, oddly, bat, sea bird, and bramble bush (G 500). Other alliances are more plausible: dog and rooster (G 149); donkey and rooster (G 235).<sup>51</sup>

In one fable humans complain to Zeus that all the other animals have traits that far surpass their own. Zeus points out that they have the highest gift of all, *logos*:

They say that in the beginning, when the animals were being formed and were given their gifts by Zeus, he gave strength to one, to another speed, and to another wings. Man, however, being naked, said to Zeus, “I am the only one that you have left bereft of a gift.” Zeus replied, “You are unaware of the gift you have obtained, but it is the greatest gift of all. You have received the gift of *logos*, which has power among gods and mortals alike. It is more powerful than the powerful and swifter than the swift.” Man then, recognizing the gift he had been given, went away, bowing down before Zeus and giving him thanks.

[Epimythium]: *This shows that while we have all been honored by God with the gift of speech and reason, there are some who are unaware of such a great honor and are instead jealous of the animals even though the animals lack both sense and speech.*

(G 514 = Chambry 1925: 57, P 311)

*Logos* is a very important word, implying both reason and speech. Gibbs notes that “The Greeks regularly referred to animals as *aloga*, or lacking in *logos*. This Greek phrase thus has a double meaning much like the English expression ‘dumb animal,’” used to indicate animals that are both speechless and stupid (G 514).

What mental capacities do animals exhibit? Self-awareness has long been seen as a sign of a human mind and, thus, a Gap. During the 1960s and 1970s Gordon Gallup studied the self-awareness of animals, using mirrors in his experiments. He found that some animals try to intimidate, attack, or court their image in a mirror, but others, such as chimpanzees, use the mirror to inspect parts of their bodies they normally do not see, or react to a painted dot on the mirror image that has been surreptitiously put on their forehead (Guenther 2017; Suddendorf 2013: 51–6). Ancient beast fable illustrates these various reactions. A dog drops his meat to growl at his reflection in a river (G 263), and a fox mistakes the moon’s reflection in water for cheese (G 264). Others use their reflections to admire themselves, a demonstration of vanity that usually gets them in trouble (G 262, 266, 550, 554; B 79; Ph 1.12).

Fable animals have the human faculty of retrospection, for in many fables an animal that has come to ruin ends the fable with a rueful exclamation that serves as a moral.<sup>52</sup> Animals plan, deceive, lie, and justify. Predators try to find slights to serve as justification for eating their prey as opposed to merely eating them out of instinct (G 129–30). Animals routinely exhibit sadness and depression, inflated egos, and the mental capacity to solve problems and foresee consequences. A few of them even act as detectives, such as the fox who notices that there are tracks entering the lion’s lair, but none coming out (B 103). In an ultimate example of human emotions, a snake commits suicide as an alternative to prolonged pain:

A wasp landed on the head of a snake and began to harass him, stinging him again and again. As he was suffering from terrible pain but couldn’t get rid of his enemy, the snake crawled into the road and looked for an oncoming wagon. He then put his head under the wheel as he said, “I die together with my enemy!”

[Epimythium] *This is a fable for people who share their troubles with their enemies.*<sup>53</sup>

Finally, religion would seem to be a uniquely human pursuit, yet the animals of fable have various relationships with the gods. To note but a few, they pray to the gods (G 10, 27, 479, 481) complain to them (G 507), offer sacrifice (G 99, 320), take their advice (G 182), and receive gifts from them (G 97). But a dog boldly threatens to urinate on a Herm (a stone boundary marker carved with the head of Hermes), which talks to it (G 564), and a hen even settles a quarrel between Juno and Venus (G 573).

It would be rewarding if these examples spoke to clear, indisputable evidence of the ancients' view of the Gap, but they do not. Some generalities do emerge, however. The authors (and audiences) of fables were unable to draw a firm line in the metaphorical sand to separate human from animal. Animals in reality occasionally engage in humanlike activities, as the ancients observed, but the animals of fable go further, often sharing the same emotions, motivations, virtues, flaws, and foibles that we exhibit. And they do so while preserving their essential animal traits—remaining quadrupedal, retaining their basic characteristics, and preying upon other animals. They are not so much a mirror image of us as a mirror with which we can evaluate ourselves.

### ANIMALS AS ANIMALS: ANIMAL LITERACY

I have elsewhere used the term “animal literacy” to describe the basic and shared set of beliefs any civilization has about its animals (Kitchell 2017).<sup>54</sup> For example, our shared conceptions about what a lion is allow both Simba in *The Lion King* and the Cowardly Lion in the *Wizard of Oz* to work as characters. The vast majority of depictions in the Aesopic tradition are based on the animal literacy of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Even when the animals act uncharacteristically, we know they are breaking the generally agreed upon knowledge or beliefs that the ancients held about them.

One fable in particular provides an excellent example of this tendency (G 600). A lion, king of the beasts, lies dying in a ravine. He can no longer hunt, and so enlists the aid of a fox, asking it to lure a deer into the ravine. The crafty fox finds the deer and preys on the deer's ego, saying that the lion is dying and is concerned about who will replace him as king. He then lists the other animals being considered for kingship, enumerating the traits of each that render it unsuitable for the position: the boar is too arrogant, the bear too dull, the leopard fierce of spirit, the tiger boastful and a loner. The only animal suitable to become the next king is the deer. After all, the fox adds, the deer is noble in appearance, long-lived, and scares away snakes with its antlers. The flattered deer enters the lion's den and is attacked, but escapes with a wound. After a second round of cajoling by the fox, the foolish deer becomes the lion's dinner. In this fable, the fox relies on stereotypes that often accord with ancient beliefs about nature: as far back as Homer, the boar is confident in its strength, the lion courageous, and the leopard fierce. It was widely believed and reported in antiquity, albeit incorrectly, that deer lived to prodigious ages and that their antlers repelled snakes (see Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 8.112–19). Such stereotypic beliefs appear throughout the fables: the fox and crow are clever, the owl wise, sheep stupid. The ass is slow, both mentally and physically, but has great endurance.

The fox—as a favorite of storytellers from antiquity through the medieval French Reynard the Fox, down to Uncle Remus's Bre'r Fox and Roald Dahl's



*Fantastic Mr. Fox*—deserves some special attention. The prevalence of the fox in Aesopic fable is evidenced in a well-known Greek vase painting (Figure 4.2). Here we see the traditionally deformed Aesop seated on a rock, engaged in conversation with a fox; note that both have open mouths as if talking, and that the fox uses human gestures as it speaks.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Aesop's almost inhuman deformity (hunchback, ugly, bald), coupled with the fact that, for a time, he lacked that most human trait, speech, made him more attuned to the speech of non-human animals in the mind of the ancients (see Hawkins 2017: 12).

The craftiness of the fox in fables exceeds that of most humans, because the fox was considered a supremely clever animal.<sup>56</sup> It was believed, for example,



FIGURE 4.2: Aesop seated on a rock, engaged in conversation with a fox. Athenian red-figure cup, c. 475–425 BCE. Vatican Collection. Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, Painter of Bologna 417, fifth century BCE. Photograph by Alinari/Art Resource, NY, with permission.

that the fox would play dead to lure in carrion birds, only to catch them when they came near; that foxes used guile and forethought to capture much swifter hares; and that this guile made them notoriously hard to catch.<sup>57</sup> In several fables, the fox avoids a hunter's trap, often by convincing a duller animal to spring it for him.<sup>58</sup> Yet they could be caught, and dead foxes were occasionally depicted on Greek vases and had a variety of uses in the Greco-Roman world (Kitchell 2014: 70–2). One Athenian red-figure askos—a type of vessel for liquid, modeled after animal skins—depicts a fox caught in a trap (Figure 4.3).

Another vulpine trait in fables is the fox's consistent use of wisecracks and rejoinders, a trait for which Aesop himself was famous.<sup>59</sup> The Greek poet Archilochus relates a tale about a fox that was envious when the monkey was elected king of the animals (G 24): to bring the monkey down a peg, the fox showed him a baited trap and said the bait was a treasure that the fox could have taken, but saved for his majesty. Naturally, the monkey was caught and cursed the fox, which merely replied, "With a rear end like that, you can be king?"



FIGURE 4.3: Fox caught in a trap. After Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. G273, 450–400 BCE. Digital illustration by Michele Angel, with permission.

The idea of animal literacy goes well beyond stereotyping animals in fables: it lies at the heart of the genre.<sup>60</sup> While Mr. Toad can drive a car and Pooh can ride balloons, ancient fables reflect the predominant belief that wild animals cannot lose or change their very nature. As headlines today attest, so too in fable the outcome is poor for humans who try to raise wild animals such as wolf cubs in their house (G 34–6), as exemplified early on by Aeschylus’s metaphor of a house-reared lion-cub (Ag. 717–31). The abovementioned fable in which the weasel-turned-human-bride gives herself away by chasing a mouse relies on the same belief.

One of the most salient facts about animals in fable is how often their behavior accords with their true nature. Some are fairly easy to spot. For example, frogs do inflate themselves (G 349), a bee does die when it stings (G 509), and snakes do rob birds’ nests of eggs (G 181). The fables also depict weasels and snakes in household settings, where they served as a means of pest control (G 63, 178; B 27). For other fables, the natural animal behavior that would have been known to the original audience might be less clear today: G 102, for example, states that Egyptian dogs would only drink from the Nile while running along it. The story arose from the fact that crocodiles are “opportunistic feeders” who stalk land creatures by lying submerged at the river bank, then propelling forward to snatch their prey, which historically includes humans, their livestock, and their dogs (Pooley 2016: 425, 433; Whitaker and Whitaker 2004: 181). In a fable attributed to Aesop by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1393b), a fox is suffering from ticks and a hedgehog offers to remove them. The fox declines, saying these ticks are sated with its blood and if they are removed, new ones will just move in. Beneath the story lies a zoological truth: not only do hedgehogs suffer from ticks, but the two animals share ticks that prey on them both—*Ixodes hexagonus* and *Ixodes ricinus*. In G 107 a fox wants to eat a cicada, which to modern ears sounds strange; but *Vulpes vulpes*—the red fox, common across most of the world including Eurasia—while mostly fond of small mammals, is an opportunistic eater and does indeed eat insects (Malcolm 2004: 279). In another example of naturalistic animal behavior, predators and prey do engage in a truce at waterholes during times of drought (G 61).

G 133 provides an aetiology as to why crows live thousands of years. That time span is clearly an exaggeration, but corvids are actually quite long lived.<sup>61</sup> Their cleverness also underscores some fables, such as G 453:

A thirsty crow caught sight of a very large water-jar that contained a small amount of water at its very bottom. For a long time the crow tried to spill the water onto level ground in order to satisfy its tremendous thirst. After no amount of effort proved effective, the annoyed crow applied all its tricks with renewed cunning. After deliberately sinking pebbles into the jar, the water rose a bit until it made drinking it possible.

[Epimythium]: *This shows us that thoughtfulness is superior to brute strength, since this is the way that the bird completed the task it had begun.*<sup>62</sup>

In 2009, Nathan John Emery and Christopher David Bird published a study demonstrating the cognitive abilities of corvids, reporting, “We presented four captive rooks with a problem analogous to Aesop’s fable: raising the level of water so that a floating worm moved into reach. All four subjects solved the problem with an appreciation of precisely how many stones were needed. Three subjects also rapidly learned to use large stones over small ones” (Bird and Emery 2009: 1410).

Other fables clearly contain an animal’s natural behavior in their narrative. G 48 concerns a farmer annoyed with the cranes eating his seeds: he snared them, simultaneously catching a stork that was with the cranes but had never eaten the seeds. Based on the natural range of the birds, the stork was probably a member of *Ciconia nigra* or, more likely, *Ciconia ciconia*. Their diet consists primarily of snakes, lizards, and amphibians, and not seeds (Arnott 2008: 169; Whitehead 2004: 273–4). The Eurasian cranes in question (*Grus grus*), in contrast, prefer vegetation, and their annual migration through Greece coincided with plowing season in antiquity (Archibald 2004: 26, 34; Arnott 2008: 52). And while the method given for how bears obtain crabs to eat is fantastic (G 450), bears are omnivorous and do eat crabs along sea shores, turning over rocks at low tide to find them.

Other fables cannot be traced to actual natural behaviors, but are based on a form of animal literacy born of widely believed folklore. The tale of how a beaver would castrate itself to deter those hunting it lasted well into the Middle Ages (G 451). Beavers were indeed hunted for their pelts, but also for their “testicles,” which were said to have medicinal properties.<sup>63</sup> In actuality, beavers have internal testicles as well as internal sacs that secrete a viscous substance they use for marking territory. It is the latter that was undoubtedly so avidly sought, but to the masses, a beaver simply looked like it had no external genitalia.

G 23 tells us that an elephant would be a poor king because, despite its size, it is afraid of pigs. The belief in this fear is actually based on a historical incident reported by the second-century CE author Polyaeus (*Stratagems of War* 4.6.3), describing the siege of Megara in 266 BCE by Antigonos II Gonatos and his elephants. The Megarians smeared some pigs with pitch, lit them on fire, and let them loose; the creatures’ squeals of pain caused havoc among the elephants. After this Antigonos ordered his Indian elephant breeders to raise them with pigs to lessen their fear.<sup>64</sup> One suspects that an actual event also led to the belief that the lion was afraid of roosters, but the event remains to be found (G 235, 247).<sup>65</sup> The belief that the cuckoo could change into hawk can be traced back to Aristotle’s study on animals (G 300, *Hist. an.* 563b).<sup>66</sup> Other claims about animal behavior in the fables are clearly beyond belief, however,

with no basis in animal literacy: a weasel, too old to hunt, coats itself in flour and lies still, hoping mice will come near, thinking she is a snack (G 298); a cat hangs upside down in a chicken coop pretending to be a bag (G 299). Neither animal succeeds.

Another category of fable centers on an animal breaking its nature, trying to be something it is not. This, too, is rooted in the idea that an animal's nature is immutable. Gibbs devotes two entire sections to such tales. Some involve taking on disguises, like the the wolf who dons a sheep's pelt to infiltrate the flock and obtain an easy meal (G 321). Other examples include foolish donkeys, who variously don a lion's skin (G 322–3), try to act like a pet dog (G 338), climb on the roof like a monkey (G 339), or play a lyre (G 404). Other animals come to ruin by altering their appearance, like the frog that wants to be as large as an ox (G 349), the lizard that wants to be long as a snake (G 347), and the birds that beg the peacock for some plumage (G 326, 329), and the jackdaw that paints itself white to move in with doves (G 325).

## POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FABLES

Beast fables are set everywhere animals can be found, and an endless display of power and rank is at work—especially when country meets city and wild meets domesticated. The first type of power is that of the natural order of things, namely, a more powerful animal over a less powerful one. This power is exerted through permutations of the predator/prey relationship.

For example, the earliest recorded fable, Hesiod's tale of the "Hawk and Nightingale" discussed above, is a brutal reminder to the nightingale of its weakness. Likewise, the lion, bull, wolf, and eagle are, as ancient cultural literacy dictates, apex predators, generally victorious in their encounters. Even when they are bested by some lesser creature, it is done against the fact that it is an inversion of power. For example, one fable centers around the fact that a lion complains that despite being king of the beasts, he is afraid of roosters (G 247). When he finds out that an elephant is being pestered by a gnat, it cheers him up. Elsewhere, a gnat successfully bites a lion several times and boasts about it; but in a sort of fable-based karma, it soon dies in a spiderweb (G 243). Even a casual reader of the fables notes quickly that those with less power can win the day despite their physical limitations. Perhaps the best-known example of this is "The Tortoise and the Hare":

The hare laughed at the tortoise's feet but the tortoise declared, "I will beat you in a race!" The hare replied, "Those are just words. Race with me, and you'll see!" ... When the time for the race had been decided upon, the tortoise did not delay, but immediately took off down the race course. The hare, however, lay down to take a nap, confident in the speed of his feet.

Then, when the hare eventually made his way to the finish line, he found that the tortoise had already won.

[Epimythium]: *The story shows that many people have good natural abilities which are ruined by idleness; on the other hand, sobriety, zeal and perseverance can prevail over indolence.*<sup>67</sup>

Or, in the modern, more succinct version of the epimythium: “Slow and steady wins the race.” Other fables show animals overcoming a larger opponent despite their own small size (G 241–3). The impact of this and similar stories lies precisely in the perceived advantage of the larger beast.<sup>68</sup> Size also plays a role in one fable where frogs are right to be nervous when bulls fight each other nearby (G 12); as an old African proverb says, “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” In his version of this fable, Phaedrus includes the promythium, “The lowly suffer when the powerful quarrel” (1.30.1). Power also stems from a social hierarchy, almost approaching snobbery, among the animals in fable: paralleling the actual valuations of the ancients, the horse feels superior to other equids (B7) and the mule feels above the donkey (G 64, 206), while the donkey is inferior to the ox and mule (G 64, 218), works the hardest, gets fed the worst, and is beaten frequently.<sup>69</sup>

Of domesticated animals, the dog reigns supreme, but its privileged position is not without cost. It would seem that dogs have a safe, well-fed life under the patronage of humans, but the fables are of two minds. Dogs are said by the wolves to be fed with scraps (G 30), and complain to Jupiter about their poor food (G 569).<sup>70</sup> Yet dogs steal good food from human kitchens and feel free to talk back to their masters (B 79; G 152, 393). In one fable, domestic dogs trained to fight in the games are mocked by street dogs who would not trade their lives for one filled with danger and collars (G 409). The famous story of “The City Mouse and the Country Mouse” stresses the same point:

Once, a city mouse was received hospitably at the house of a country mouse where he dined on a simple meal of acorns. He finished his business and then, with many entreaties, led the country mouse to the city. He led him into a room packed with a great deal of food. When the country mouse had thoroughly enjoyed a variety of foods the steward opened the door. The city mouse hid himself easily in a mouse hole well known to him. But the poor country mouse was at a loss in this unfamiliar house and, fearing death, he ran all around the walls. The steward took what he wanted and closed the door. The city mouse then once more urged the other to eat. But the country mouse said, “There is no way I can do that; I’m scared to death! Do you think that man will come back?” This is how afraid he was. The city mouse said “But you won’t be able to find delicacies like these if you leave.” The other responded, “Then I’ll eat acorns; but I’ll be free.”



[Epimythium] *It is better for one to live in poverty than to be held captive by the concerns riches bring.*<sup>71</sup>

Clearly, the fables are quite willing to show both sides of the argument. Humans have the power of owner/keeper over many of the animals, and certain of the animals, as a sheep claims (G 103), seem willing to exist in a symbiotic relationship as long as the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Others reject the bargain.

## TALKING ANIMALS: THE ULTIMATE GAP?

From the time of Aristotle to today, the ability to use speech has been posited as the ultimate Gap between humans and other animals.<sup>72</sup> Yet the animals in the Aesopic tradition talk at will—and humans take this as a matter of course. One reason for this is that the fables seem to be set during a sort of magical time resembling in part the golden age many ancient authors posited, during which humans and animals coexisted in relative peace and harmony and animals could talk.<sup>73</sup> In some, animals can speak to one another in a sort of universal animal language, while other writers portray humans and animals as able to speak to one another.<sup>74</sup>

Rather like our “Once upon a time, in a land far away,” for some fables we find two stock openings that reflect belief in such a time. The first is, “At the time when animals spoke human language,” and the other is, “When all animals spoke the same language.”<sup>75</sup> Certain human characters, such as the seers Melampus and Teiresias who were reported in antiquity as understanding animals’ speech, may represent nostalgia for these times (Galoppin 2016). The golden age is also hinted at in fables where justice prevailed and the king, a lion acted, “as if he were a human being” (G 1920). A similar remnant of the golden age might exist in the ancients’ fascination with animals such as the parrot, crow, jay, and raven, who could imitate human speech (Kitchell 2020).

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that the non-human is a substantial presence in ancient fable and that animals are especially prominent. There is a question that is not asked often enough: why animals? What is the advantage or pleasure the Greeks and Romans derived from inhabiting their fables with them? Could not the same ends of entertainment and moral instruction have been met with totally fictional or mythical human characters?

Kurke and Forsdyke argue that the fables were vehicles for social commentary, poking fun at the powerful and wise while using animals to provide a buffer between the intent of the fable and their real targets (Kurke 2011: *passim*, see esp. 11–12; Forsdyke 2012: *passim*, esp. ch. 2). This theory is surely true in many cases, but leaves a significant number of fables unaccounted for, especially



those that seem merely to be amusing tales, such as the one about a mother crab foolishly trying to get her offspring to walk in a straight line (G 369), or one fable that is essentially a joke in which a woman enduring a painful labor is told to take to her bed—and asks why she should go to the place that put her in this condition in the first place (G 538).

In the end, fable is too broad a genre to attach any one interpretation to the presence of animals in so many stories. I believe that ancient fabulists saw the enormous variety of animal behavior as a very convenient canvas upon which to paint all aspects of the human experience. The ant and bee demonstrate industry and the donkey is able to carry heavy loads. Crows and foxes are intelligent and the peacock displays for attention. Lions are fierce and deer skittish. Such animals allow fabulists to show the good as well as the bad in humans. They simultaneously show us how complex were the relationships between animals and humans in Greco-Roman society and the extent to which fabulists relied on animal literacy to make their points believable and entertaining.

Let us look at one final fable, “The Lion and the Horse” (G 313) to show how laden with insight a single fable can be:

[Promythium]: *Those who are ignorant of their craft will give themselves away, as the following fable shows.*

A very powerful lion saw a horse grazing in a field. In order to cleverly deceive the horse, the lion approached him in a friendly fashion and said he was a doctor. The horse sensed a trick, but he did not reject the lion’s help. Finally things came to a point where he discovered the lion’s trick. He pretended that he had a splinter in his hoof and lifting up his foot it said, “Help me, brother; I am so glad you are here! Deliver me from the splinter I have stepped on.” The lion approached as if it were concerned, concealing his deceit and the horse suddenly kicked the lion. Down fell the deadly foe and it lay on the ground for a long time. When it came to, it didn’t see the horse anywhere and realized that its head and face and whole body had been wounded. “I deserved this,” the lion said, “for approaching the horse so gently. I came to it as a friend and doctor, but I should have approached it like an enemy, the way I used to!”

[Epimythium] *Therefore, whoever hears these words—be who you are and do not lie.*

In this one short fable we can find allegory (“don’t try to be what you are not”), purely human traits such as deviousness, planning, and pretense, a totally natural power structure (even if it is reversed in the end), and a suspicion of doctors that is found elsewhere in ancient sources.<sup>76</sup>

The use of the non-human in fable is as broad as the canvas of fable itself, and its manifestations are as numerous as the traits of the most complicated animal of all—us.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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# Monsters and the Monstrous

### *Ancient Expressions of Cultural Anxieties*

DEBBIE FELTON

Many of the most recognizable monsters in Western culture, such as Medusa, Cerberus, and the Cyclopes, started to appear in literature and art nearly three thousand years ago. Other, more generic types of monstrous or uncanny entities, such as dragons and ghosts, are even older and appear in art and literature across the globe. This chapter covers such creatures in the earliest folk and fairy tales of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean areas, keeping in mind that much of our information comes from tales, or, in most cases, prototypes for tales, embedded within the larger context of Near Eastern and Greek myths. The chapter first considers what the concept of “monster” might have meant for people in those geographical regions thousands of years ago, and then examines what tales from antiquity survive that incorporated monsters, what kinds of monster predominate in these tales, and what the presence and roles of monsters in the tales might have meant.

## CONCEPTIONS OF THE MONSTROUS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND MEDITERRANEAN

For many of the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, the “monstrous” initially came into expression in art as a way to give visual form to ill-understood phenomena that they perceived as evil, such as natural disasters and diseases. Then “each region devised its own fearsome beings” whose appearances seem to have been influenced in part by the climate and fauna of the respective region (Porada 1987: 1; cf. Van Duzer 2012: 387–408). As early as the fifth and fourth millennia BCE in Mesopotamia, for example—a region that covered what now includes modern-day Iraq—people conceived of evil forces as hybrids incorporating the most dangerous features of two or more animals, most commonly the lion (teeth and claws), the eagle (beaks and talons), and the serpent (deadly poison). By the third millennium, such creatures started appearing in some of the earliest forms of story: narrative cylinder seal pictorial designs, which depicted monsters being “apprehended and punished,” possibly reflecting “the general sense of security” under the kings of that period (Porada 1987: 1), such as Sargon and his successor Rimush, who reigned *c.* 2334–2284 and *c.* 2279–2270 BCE, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

For another example, during the same millennia and later, the animals that were most feared in Egypt and that therefore became “monstrous” in Egyptian art and, eventually, literature, were the most dangerous Nile Valley inhabitants: the hippopotamus, the crocodile, and various serpents—particularly the large and highly venomous cobra (Porada 1987: 2).<sup>2</sup> A tale from the New Kingdom period (sixteenth to eleventh centuries BCE) known as “The Doomed Prince” demonstrates such concerns: it is prophesized that the newborn son of a king will eventually die “through the crocodile, or the snake, or the dog.”<sup>3</sup> The story, only part of which survives intact, appears headed for a happy ending as the prince’s wife proves instrumental in helping him avoid the dangers. The tale falls under ATU 934 (“Tales of the Predestined Death”) and specifically ATU 934D (“Outwitting Fate”). But one well-known Middle Kingdom story presents a different aspect of the serpent, imbuing it with a numinous quality. In “The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor” (*c.* twentieth to eighteenth centuries BCE) a man tells the story of how, having survived a shipwreck, he washed up alone on the shore of an island inhabited by a huge snake: “He was of thirty cubits; his beard was over two cubits long. His body was overlaid with gold; his eyebrows were of real lapis lazuli” (Lichtheim 2019: 262). But the snake indicated that he would not harm the sailor, so long as the latter told the truth. The man did so. The snake then prophesized that after four months a ship would arrive at the island and take the man home, but also said that the island, rich in natural resources, would no longer be there if or when the man returned. All transpired as the serpent foretold.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere bordering the Mediterranean, serpentine creatures predominated as the prevailing monsters both at sea and on land, perhaps because, as among the ancient Greeks for example, snakebites were perceived as particularly noxious; if the bites were not fatal (as in the case of Eurydice) they were certainly nauseating (as in the case of Philoctetes).<sup>5</sup> Although many serpents of ancient Mediterranean folktale posed serious threats to human existence, others were threatening only in their capacity as guardians of areas into which humans were forbidden to tread, as implied in the Egyptian story of the shipwrecked sailor and exemplified in ancient Greek stories such as Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece guarded by a dragon (ATU 513A), or Heracles' eleventh Labor, which required him to fetch the Golden Apples of the Hesperides from a tree guarded by the hundred-headed serpent Ladon.<sup>6</sup>

An astonishing number of monsters in early Greek myth and folktale, if not entirely serpentine, retained an extraordinary number of ophidian characteristics, such as multiple snaky heads or limbs. According to some ancient authors, even Cerberus, the multiheaded hound that guarded the entrance to Hades, sported a serpent's tail and a mane of snake-heads,<sup>7</sup> as also depicted frequently in Greek vase painting (Figure 5.1).



FIGURE 5.1: Cerberus with a snaky mane, being led on a leash by Heracles. Water-jug from Caere in Etruria, Italy, by the Eagle Painter, c. 525 BCE. Public domain.

Other monstrous creatures in Greek and Roman tales included familiar animals with exaggerated or unusual characteristics such as the Nemean Lion, whose hide was impervious to weapons; hybrids such as the Theban Sphinx and Cretan Minotaur; and man-eating giants, such as the Cyclops Polyphemus and the Laestrygones. Much about classical monsters was in keeping with earlier Near Eastern conceptions: their physical monstrosity often included hybridity and extraordinary size, while their behavioral monstrosity exhibited itself through excessively violent behavior that posed a threat to humans and human control over the environment.

In general, as many scholars of monster theory have observed, monsters tend to be culturally determined.<sup>8</sup> Each culture has its own anxieties and fears, its own definitions of what is “normal” and acceptable, while even within cultures people have different viewpoints about what constitutes “the monstrous.” So, as Liz Gloyn points out, rather than being able to settle on a shared definition of “monster,” creating a consensus about the concept, whether for classical or modern monsters, “would be far from straightforward” (2020: 3). In the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, at least, monsters embodied a variety of fears: fear of chaos triumphing over order, of nature obliterating human civilization, of irrationality victorious over reason, and of the little-understood nature of the female as a threat to male dominance. These ancient stories repeatedly present monsters being conquered by gods and men—the perceived forces of order, civilization, reason, and patriarchy inevitably prevailed in ancient thought (Felton 2012: 103).

A partial clue to the ancient conception of “monster” comes through the language the Greeks and Romans used to signify such beings. For example, the Greek term *teras* referred to both portents from the gods and, in a more concrete sense, a physical monstrosity, something deformed; hence our modern term “teratology,” which refers not only to mythologies about marvelous, unusual, and inhuman physical creatures but also to the scientific study of congenital abnormalities. The English word “monster” itself comes from the Latin *monstrum*, etymologically linked both with *monere* (“to warn”) and *monstrare* (“to show”); a *monstrum*, to the Romans, originally denoted any manifestation of divine will “that breaches the natural order, provoking awe or at least shock,” and eventually came to be the closest thing to a regular Latin term for any physically anomalous being.<sup>9</sup>

So, for the purposes of this chapter, “monster” refers to the sorts of creature discussed above: anomalous physical beings, often huge and/or hybrid, whose main purposes in the stories are to act as disruptive agents. At a minimum, they prove unsettling in their unexpectedness; at a maximum, they pose threats to humans and their attempts to settle into and impose order on the natural world. This perspective also accommodates such creatures as Pegasus. Born from the neck of the beheaded Gorgon Medusa, this winged horse was an anomalous,

hybrid, but ultimately benevolent creature harnessed by the hero Bellerophon in his fight against the Chimaera (Figure 5.2), itself a grotesque, destructive, fire-breathing hybrid with the body and head of a lion, but with an additional head—that of a goat—rising from its back, and a serpent for a tail, including the serpent’s head, making the creature tricephalic (see also Ogden 2013a: 75–81).

The same considerations also allow us to include under the rubric of “monster” such creatures as centaurs and satyrs, the latter of whose hybrid human-animal mixture varied across Greek and Roman culture from having a horse’s ears and tail to having a goat’s ears, tail, legs, and even horns, but whose “monstrous” behavior was limited to humanlike drunkenness and unsuccessful attempts to seduce nymphs or the occasional human female.<sup>10</sup> And, over time, satyrs were portrayed less as ribald and more as a type of nature-spirit that guarded the woodland. The shifting and relative cultural conceptions of what was anomalous and therefore monstrous are neatly reflected in one of Aesop’s fables, “The Satyr and the Traveler” (G 368, P 35; ATU 1342):<sup>11</sup>



FIGURE 5.2: The Chimaera of Arezzo. Etruscan bronze statue, c. 400 BCE. Public domain.



When rough winter set in with thick frost, and every field stiffened under the hard ice, a traveler found himself stuck in a dense fog. The path was no longer visible, preventing him from continuing. The story goes that a satyr, one of the guardians of the forest, took pity on the man and offered to shelter him in his cave. The satyr, as a native of the wild countryside, was straightaway both amazed and greatly afraid upon observing the immense power of the man. For first, in order to restore some vitality to his freezing limbs, the man thawed his hands by blowing hot air onto them. After the cold had dissipated, he began to enjoy the generous hospitality of his host; the satyr, eager to show off country life,<sup>12</sup> had set out the best of what the forest had to give, and offered a bowl filled with hot Lyaeon wine, so that its warmth would spread through the man's limbs and relieve the chill. But then the man cringed at touching the hot bowl with his lips and blew again—with a cool breath! At this, his host, utterly terrified, was dumbstruck at the double portent (*monstro*), and, driving the man out into the woods, ordered him to go far, far away. "I do not want anyone ever to come into my cave again," said the satyr, "who breathes two different ways from the same mouth!"

This anecdote provides a metaphorical attack against lies and duplicity (Adrados 1999–2003: 3:50), ironically pointing out *man's* unreliable, deceptive dual nature rather than overtly referencing the "monstrous" dual nature of the hybrid satyr, who instead appears as a perfectly normal representative of nature. The satyr, rather than the human, exhibits the majority of emotional reactions:<sup>13</sup> he pities (*miseratus*) the lost traveler, but then feels awe (*miratur*) and extreme fear (*pavet, perterritus*) and is stunned (*obstipuit*) at what he perceives as the highly unnatural and therefore monstrous ability demonstrated by his guest. That is, the satyr displays the emotions typically associated with human reactions to monsters.<sup>14</sup>

The fable about the satyr and the traveler highlights another relative aspect of the monstrous in folktale (and in general). Whereas in that story the traveler, implied as coming from a more urban area than his rustic host, was himself viewed as the monstrous element in the story, non-human monstrous creatures in Greek and Roman stories almost invariably dwelled outside of settled, urban areas, instead inhabiting mountains, rocks, caves, cliffs, and other natural, often liminal places largely untouched by human settlement. The farther from major urban centers people went, the more likely they were to encounter the monstrous, and the edges of known civilization were particularly rife with strange, threatening creatures (see Van Duzer 2012). The Sphinx, for example, lived on Mount Phikion outside of the city of Thebes; the Cyclops Polyphemus lived in a cave; the snake-haired Medusa and her Gorgon sisters traditionally were said to live on a rocky island in the Mediterranean. Similarly, bodies of water including lakes, marshes, and the often-hostile sea held many monsters

(Boardman 1987). As Jan Bremmer observed, such locations are not surprising since wilderness is where “unordered” things such as monsters belong (1997: 3).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the ancient Greeks regularly identified women with the wildness of nature, considering them irrational and emotionally overreactive, so it is probably not a coincidence that a very high proportion of monsters in ancient stories are female. Similarly, the serpent was strongly associated with the female, so it is also probably not a coincidence that so many classical monsters are serpentine.<sup>16</sup> Many Greek monsters are born of Earth herself and serve as metaphors for the struggle of man over nature. Moreover, Sue Blundell suggests that women’s capacity for childbearing aligned them with natural forces beyond male control (1998: 17–19), and the fact that women sometimes also produced offspring with physical abnormalities only added to the perception of females as potentially terrifying and destructive. Creatures such as the Python, Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, the Harpies, and many others all spoke to men’s fear of women’s destructive potential. Given that so many classical myths, legends, and folktales—overlapping rather than distinct categories of story—involve a male hero conquering a female monster, these stories would seem, at least to some extent, to fulfill a male fantasy of controlling what was natural and female.

Having considered several examples illustrating how and why the ancients designated various creatures as monstrous, we can now turn to additional tales from antiquity that incorporate monsters and what the presence and roles of monsters in the tales might have meant. The preponderance of serpentine monsters becomes particularly evident in the most ubiquitous type of monster-tale from antiquity: “The Dragon-Slayer.”

## TAMING CHAOS: THE DRAGON-SLAYER

The story of Bellerophon referred to above is just one early variant on a very old, very widespread tale: “The Dragon-Slayer” (ATU 300), which, illustrating the broad presence of monstrous adversaries, comprises the main sort of monster-tale surviving from antiquity. Despite the tale type’s name, the monster need not be a dragon; any monstrous creature pitted against a hero qualifies (Hansen 2002: 119). The tale also usually includes, among other significant motifs, the rescue of a maiden who has been intended as a sacrifice, as in the case of Perseus (see below). But as William Hansen points out, many of the ancient mythic combats between a god or hero and a dragon feature neither the sacrificial maiden nor other common details of the tale type, and thus bear only the most general resemblance to the international folktale (2002: 121–2). For example, Bellerophon’s marriage to an eligible princess was unrelated to his facing the Chimera. Nevertheless, because many of these early myths seem to constitute prototypes of the later, more specific tale type in addition to providing thematic

context for it, they are worth considering along with the ancient stories that adhere more closely to the details of the traditional tale.

In a number of “dragon-slayer” stories from antiquity, the monster is not necessarily serpentine, though the hero may win a princess; examples include Theseus’s killing the Minotaur and absconding with Ariadne, and Oedipus’s killing the Sphinx and marrying Queen Jocasta (though these certainly do not have fairy-tale endings—Theseus abandons Ariadne, and Jocasta happens to be Oedipus’s mother). But the vast majority of hero stories involve what are essentially dragons. Why do serpentine monsters appear so frequently as the principal antagonists in early myths? Daniel Ogden suggests that snake-based monsters make particularly popular adversaries for heroes because snakes have consistently been “the most dreaded and hated animal,” citing the snake’s form of “chemical warfare” and “huge, devouring mouth,” while “being swallowed and eaten” is a basic anxiety of every living being in the food chain (2013a: 5).<sup>17</sup> Snakes were also perceived as untrustworthy.<sup>18</sup> Add to this the snake’s association with the female (also considered untrustworthy), as discussed above, and this tale type’s multivalent functions within the larger stories of Greek myth become apparent.

Many Near Eastern religions and social systems rested on an allegorical origin myth of a man battling a monster. In these cases, a young warrior-god who represents harmony, order, and often nationhood goes forth to battle a “chaos-monster” that threatens the cosmic order. In the aftermath of such apocalyptic confrontations, civilizations emerge, prosper, and flourish, and humanity takes its rightful place as master of the earth. Such monster myths proclaim our ownership over the world and justify the present order (Gilmore 2003: 28–9). So, for example, in Sumerian mythology dating to the third millennium BCE, the god Ninurta defeats a seven-headed serpent (among other monsters). In the Babylonian creation epic *Enûma Eliš* (second millennium BCE) the warrior-god Marduk conquers the dragon-like Tiamat, the embodiment of primeval chaos who also happens to be his mother.<sup>19</sup>

The earliest prototype of “The Dragon-Slayer” in classical literature, heavily influenced by the Near Eastern stories above, appears in the *Theogony* of the poet-farmer Hesiod (eighth century BCE). The *Theogony* (literally, “Origin of the Gods”) presents an early Greek creation myth describing not only the physical origins and organization of the cosmos but also how life came into being. The first entities, which appear out of nothingness and are mostly amorphous, abstractions of concepts such as “void” and “doom,” begin a torturous, chaotic, largely experimental process of reproduction that results in various monstrous creatures, many of which become the most well-known monsters of Greek myth, such as the Cyclopes and Cerberus. Hesiod aims to explain how Zeus became head of the Greek pantheon, so the *Theogony* presents a succession myth (see note 19), in this case a cosmic struggle toward order that comes about in the third generation of entities, with Zeus and his

divine siblings. Zeus's main obstacle, brought forth by Gaia as a "final attempt to circumvent undisputed male rule of the universe" (Harris and Platzner 2004: 83) and as a test of whether Zeus was fit to rule the cosmos, was the monster Typhoeus, representing the old, female, chthonic order. The most fearsome creature in the *Theogony*, Typhoeus appears as an embodiment of violent nature out of control:

From its shoulders sprouted a hundred heads of snaky, dreadful dragons  
flickering sooty tongues; and under its brows, from its eyes flames flashed,  
and fire burned from all its glaring heads.

(Hes., *Theog.* 824–8)

Add to this the unearthly shrieking Hesiod describes a few lines later (*Theog.* 830–5) and Typhoeus presents an eerie, otherworldly, horrific opponent (see also Ogden 2013a: 19–38). Despite Typhoeus's hurling all the forces of nature at him—earthquakes, fire, hurricanes, tidal waves—Zeus defeats the monster in an explosive epic battle, proving himself a worthy cosmic ruler (Figure 5.3). With reference to one specific aspect of "The Dragon-Slayer" tale type, it is worth noting that Zeus had special weapons, as the hero figures in this tale often do: his thunderbolts, crafted especially for him by the first generation of Cyclopes. Moreover, his defeat of Typhoeus allowed him to become king of the cosmos, upon which he began mating with a number of goddesses to procreate and thereby populate the cosmos, ultimately marrying his sister-goddess Hera.

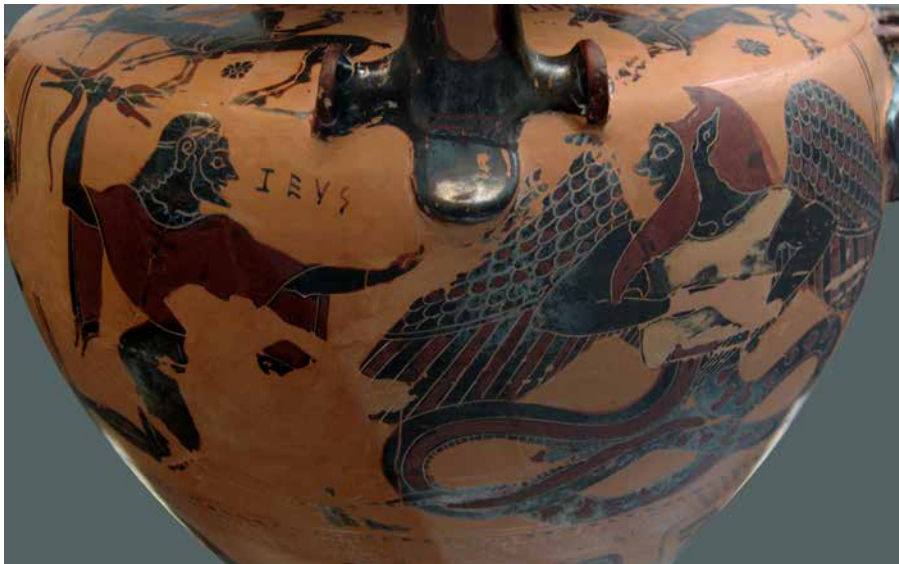


FIGURE 5.3: Zeus battling a serpent-legged Typhoeus. Water jug from Chalcis, Greece, c. 540–530 BCE. Public domain.

The dragon-slayer pattern set by Zeus and Typhoeus in the creation of the Greek mythological cosmos carried down both into stories of other Greek gods and into later mythological generations of men in which heroes inevitably had to fight monsters (serpentine or otherwise) in a reenactment of the battle for order in the cosmos—the younger, male generation trying to overcome the elder female order; civilization and rationality trying to overcome savagery and emotion.<sup>20</sup> The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* tells how Zeus's son Apollo travels to Delphi in Greece to found his own sacred sanctuary only to find the place terrorized by a monstrous she-dragon, which he promptly slays.<sup>21</sup> In killing this giant serpent Apollo abolished the old, savage, chthonic order and brought reason and culture in its place. Similarly, the Greek hero Cadmus had to kill a dragon before founding a new city in Boeotia in central Greece. He first needed to make a sacrifice to the goddess Athena, and sent several men to bring water from a nearby spring for the ritual. But they did not return. Upon investigation, Cadmus discovered that a huge serpent, a guardian of the spring, had devoured his men. He killed the snake and founded the city of Cadmeia, which became Thebes (see also Ogden 2013a: 109–18). The killing of a dragon to found a settlement represents, for the Greeks, the advance of culture over nature.<sup>22</sup>

Cadmus was one of the first Greek (mortal) heroes. This earliest generation of heroes also included Bellerophon, Perseus, and Heracles (Hercules to the Romans), all of whom faced dragon-like opponents. Perseus, best known as the slayer of Medusa—one of three snaky-haired Gorgon sisters—traveled to the Gorgons' island lair to cut off her head, viewing her reflection in a shield to avoid looking at her petrifying gaze directly.<sup>23</sup> This early myth reflects the theme of the younger, patriarchal society replacing an older, pre-agricultural, matriarchal world as the Gorgons had come into existence in the earliest days of the cosmos, their snaky hair reflecting their chthonic origins. Perseus also encounters one of the first major sea serpents in Greek myth. After slaying Medusa he passes Ethiopia, where he sees the princess Andromeda chained to a rock, about to be sacrificed to Cetus (“whale,” “sea monster”; Figure 5.4).<sup>24</sup> Perseus slays the creature with a sword (or sickle) provided by the god Hermes, and thus, wielding the emblem of a “civilized” or technologically advanced culture (capable of metalworking and agriculture), Perseus proves himself a worthy defender of society. His story also provides the earliest clear match for “The Dragon-Slayer” tale type, inasmuch as he rescues and marries Andromeda.<sup>25</sup>

The deeds of Cadmus, Perseus, and Bellerophon seem minor, however, when compared to those of Heracles, best known for his twelve Labors. Heracles was not merely physically stronger than any other hero of Greek myth; he experienced more hardships, more tortures, and faced more monstrous creatures than any of the others, and his opponents included many dragon-equivalents—starting in his infancy, when the goddess Hera, angry that her husband Zeus had fathered the hero by a mortal woman, sent two giant snakes to kill the child in his crib. But, already exhibiting prodigious strength, Heracles



FIGURE 5.4: Landscape with Perseus and Andromeda; sea monster at lower left. Roman wall painting from the Imperial Villa at Boscorecase, Italy, late first century BCE. Public domain.



strangled them both. This incident foreshadowed the monstrous battles to come. Heracles' Labors and many *parerga* ("side-adventures") included fighting the swamp-dwelling multiheaded she-serpent known as the Hydra, Ladon (mentioned above), snaky-maned Cerberus, and Scylla, along with opponents such as monstrous versions of common animals (e.g., the Nemean Lion, the Erymanthian Boar, the Stymphalian Birds; see ATU 1960, "The Great Animal") and the three-headed, six-armed giant Geryon.<sup>26</sup>

In between his Labors, Heracles participated in the hero Jason's quest to the kingdom of Colchis for the Golden Fleece. Heracles left the crew before they arrived in Colchis on the eastern edge of the Black Sea, but the quest involved Jason's having to maneuver past a dragon guarding the Fleece. Depending on the myth's variant, the dragon is slain by Jason, by Medea, or merely put to sleep by



FIGURE 5.5: Jason in the dragon's mouth (?). Greek cup from Cerveteri in Etruria, Italy, painted by Douris, c. 480–470 BCE. Public domain.



Medea, allowing Jason to steal the Fleece (see Ogden 2013a: 125–33). Figure 5.5, usually identified as Jason in the dragon's mouth based on what is clearly a ram's skin hanging on the tree in the background (in addition to the presence of the hero's mentor Athena), illustrates a version of the story that has not survived in extant literature: the hero being either consumed or regurgitated. Since he holds a spear, this may be a variant of the tale type in which a hero kills a monster by fighting his way out from the inside, as discussed in the next section.

## IN THE BELLY OF THE MONSTER

Related to sea-monster tales, “Man Swallowed by Fish” (ATU 1889G) appears in at least two substantial stories from the ancient world (Hansen 2002: 261–4). The first is the biblical tale of the prophet Jonah (c. late fifth century BCE, but set back in the eighth century). The Lord commands Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, an ancient Assyrian city in Mesopotamia, and “proclaim judgment” on it, because of its people's wickedness (Jonah 1:3). But, like many called to the Lord's service,<sup>27</sup> Jonah is initially reluctant to carry out this duty and instead tries to flee across the sea. He boards a ship, but the Lord causes a storm that endangers the ship until the sailors, by casting lots, figure out that Jonah is the cause of their misfortune. He admits this and advises them to throw him overboard, which they do. Then “the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights” (2:1). In this case, the fish is not entirely a threat but a savior, rescuing Jonah from drowning, though at the same time Jonah is trapped inside the fish, where he reflects on his situation.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, repenting his disobedience, he prayed to God to deliver him from the fish, whereupon “the Lord commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land” (2:11). The fish survived; meanwhile, the chastened prophet obediently continued on to Nineveh. The biblical story, as is typical, provides no details of Jonah's ordeal other than the basic descriptor “huge” for the fish, leaving the reader to imagine anything from cramped quarters to a cavernous interior—though more likely the former, given Jonah's inward focus.

The story clearly has a moral of sorts (“don't disobey God”) and a symbolic meaning: Jonah is “reborn” from a womb-like environment. This differs considerably from the second such story from antiquity, that in Lucian's *True Histories* (second century CE), an intentionally ironically titled satire of “marvelous adventures,” including those found in Homer's *Odyssey* (i.e., “lying tales” or “tall tales”; cf. Hansen 2002: 15). In the *True Histories*, the narrator and his ship's crew find themselves in all sorts of strange situations. At one point their ship is swept all the way up to the Moon by a whirlwind. Eventually they make it back to Earth and continue their sea voyage but encounter a whale described in monstrous terms, especially regarding its size:

We had been sailing in fair weather for only two days when, as the third day was dawning, suddenly we saw many diverse [sea] beasts and whales (*thēria kai kētē*). The largest of them all was over one hundred and fifty miles long! ... His teeth themselves were over five feet high, sharp as stakes, and white like ivory. Suddenly he was upon us, and gulped us down, ship and all. We barely missed being crushed by his teeth! Luckily, our ship slipped between them and dropped down into the whale's interior. Once we were inside, at first it was so dark that we could see nothing. But later, when the whale opened his mouth, we saw a vast cavity, broad and high, large enough to fit a city of ten thousand. Lying across this broad expanse were fish of all sizes and many other creatures all smashed to pieces, ships' sails and anchors, human bones and cargo, and, in the middle of it all, land and hills.

(Lucian, *True Histories* 1.30–1)

The monstrous whale's interior contains entire ecosystems: sea birds nesting in trees on the island's coast; a large forest; factions of fantastical, monstrous, hybrid sea creatures (such as Crab-claws and Mer-goats) engaged in territorial disputes; and even other humans—an old man and his son dwelling in a farmhouse they built after being swallowed themselves, and who, having been stranded in the whale for twenty-seven years, have been living off the vegetables, fruits, nuts, and grapevines growing from the soil inside the whale.<sup>29</sup>

Since Lucian's *True Histories* is a satire of, among other things, belief in otherworldly powers and incredible events, the shipwrecked narrator and his crew, unlike Jonah, do not pray to any gods for deliverance.<sup>30</sup> After living in the whale for nearly two years, the men decide to effect their own escape. They first try digging a tunnel through the whale's side, but after excavating for half a mile without getting anywhere they determine to kill the whale by setting the forest on fire. It takes over a week for the creature to die, and they have to prop its mouth open to avoid being trapped inside. Finally, they are able to drag their boat up and through the gaps in the whale's teeth, and find themselves back on the open ocean.<sup>31</sup>

In other stories from antiquity, rather than being swallowed by sea monsters, heroes intentionally climb into the creatures' mouths to kill them from the inside. Lycophron's *Alexandra* (early second century BCE), a poem about the heroes who fought at Troy, alludes to such a story: in this lesser-known version of Perseus's tale, the hero substitutes himself for Andromeda and plans to crawl down inside the monster and kill it by destroying its liver (Ogden 2013a: 169–70; cf. Hansen 2002: 263; Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 156–7). More well known in antiquity was the story of Heracles' rescue of Hesione, princess of Troy. Her father Laomedon had incurred the wrath of the sea god Poseidon, who sent a sea monster (*kētos*) to the plain of Troy, where it killed anyone it came across. An oracle declared that Laomedon could save his city by putting his daughter out as food for the monster, so he chained her to a

sea cliff. But Heracles, who happened to be passing by, killed the sea monster, saving Hesione. In one version of the story, Heracles “entered the body of the sea monster through its mouth and destroyed its flanks.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these tales of heroes ingested by sea monsters, at least one story from antiquity involves heroes intentionally allowing themselves to be swallowed by dragons. Recorded by the Greek travel-writer Pausanias (second century CE), the story tells how a dragon attacked the city of Thespieae in central Greece. When the townspeople appealed to Zeus for help, he instructed them to offer up a young man to the creature annually. One year, when a youth named Cleostratus was chosen by lot as the sacrifice, his lover Menestratus devised a trick to save him. Menestratus fashioned for himself a special bronze breastplate, attaching one fishhook, with its point turned outward and upward, to each of the breastplate’s little segments. Donning this armor, he surrendered himself to the monstrous serpent in Cleostratus’s place, certain that once he did so he would destroy himself but also the monster: if the dragon swallowed him, his breastplate would tear up the monster’s insides (Pausanias 9.26.7–8). Thus, Thespieae was rid of its menace.<sup>33</sup>

Many stories of being devoured by a monstrous creature may represent a deep-seated fear of being consumed. The question is then, on a nonliteral level (since the protagonists do not fear actual digestion), what sort of “consumption” we are dealing with. In Jonah’s case, he is consumed by fear (of his role of prophet, of disobeying God). Lucian’s story, on the other hand, is not so much symbolic as satiric. But the danger in these two cases comes from being trapped and feeling out of control of one’s own fate. Moreover, these “descents” into the bellies of monsters, including those of Perseus, Heracles, and Menestratus, may relate to the concept of *katabasis* (“descent”), a term used to describe heroes’ journeys to the underworld. Such journeys “are naturally associated with caves” in classical thought—several caves in ancient Greece and Italy were believed to be actual entrances to the underworld—and caves can also represent the imprisonment of the soul in the body, or being trapped in the material world, and generally being unable to “see the light” metaphorically (Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 157–8; cf. Plato, *Republic* 7.514a–520a). The end of Lucian’s whale-episode possibly also alludes to Odysseus’s encounter with Polyphemus: the narrator and his men are trapped in a cave and ultimately use fire to escape, in both cases taking care not to become trapped inside, as discussed below (cf. Georgiadou and Larmour 1998: 160).

## TALES OF MAN-EATING GIANTS

For peoples of the ancient Mediterranean region, dragons and sea monsters reflected a number of cultural concerns, such as the conflict between nature and culture, wilderness and civilization. Ogden speculates that these serpentine

creatures reflect a fear of being consumed on a more primitive level, likely also reflecting a fear of death and the unknown. Given the nature of such fears, snake-like adversaries were hardly the only standout monsters of Greek myth. Also notable was the Cyclops Polyphemus, along with other man-eating giants such as the Laestrygones and Cacus, though the latter two are not included in any folktale type.<sup>34</sup>

Polyphemus, however, provides the prototype for “The Ogre Blinded” (ATU 1137). In this tale type, a traveler, often with his companions, arrives at the dwelling of a man-eating giant and, through circumstances that vary among the tales, destroys the giant’s eyesight, thereby managing to escape its clutches (see Hansen 2002: 289). Polyphemus appears in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Odysseus and his crew discover the land of the Cyclopes during their voyage home from the Trojan War. When Odysseus narrates the story, he describes the Cyclopes as a race with no laws, no organized society or hierarchical structure of any kind; worse, “they show no concern for each other” (*Od.* 9.115). The gigantic, one-eyed Cyclopes live in caves on mountaintops—the sort of monster-appropriate liminal/marginal setting described above—and Odysseus stresses their lack of the technology usually associated with advanced civilizations: they not only do not build ships but are even pre-agricultural.<sup>35</sup>

Although Odysseus occasionally remarks upon the size and strength of Polyphemus (whose cave they enter uninvited), it is the Cyclopes’ behavior rather than his physical appearance that terrifies the Greeks. The fact that Cyclopes were one-eyed giants would already have been familiar to Homer’s audience from the account in Hesiod’s *Theogony*: “They resembled the gods in all other respects but the single eye in the middle of their forehead. So they were called ‘Cyclopes’ because they had one round eye in the middle of their forehead” (*Theog.* 143–5).<sup>36</sup> Odysseus does not even mention the single eye until describing his plan to blind the Cyclops (*Od.* 9.332–3). Rather, of more concern to Odysseus is what he considers Polyphemus’s utter disregard for the guest-host relationship. The Greeks held the concept of *xenia*, or “guest-friendship,” in very high regard: when strangers arrived at your doorstep, far from their home, the custom was to provide food, shelter, and various gifts. The expectation of guests was that they would behave well and also present their hosts with gifts. Polyphemus, however, expresses his disdain for *xenia* and instead seizes several of Odysseus’s men, smashes their brains out on the ground, and devours them, “wasting nothing: guts and flesh and marrow-filled bones—he gulped them all down” (9.292–3). Trapped in Polyphemus’s cave, Odysseus comes up with a plan: they get the creature drunk, gouge out his eye, and escape the cave by hiding under his sheep. The Cyclopes’ lack of advanced technology is also apparent when Odysseus and his remaining crew sail away, as Polyphemus tears away the top of a huge mountain and hurls it at the departing ships, barely missing them.

After their narrow escape from the Cyclops, Odysseus and his men encounter the Laestrygonians. This tribe appears to be more advanced than the Cyclopes because they have a citadel, city, and organized society, ruled by a king. But they, too, are gigantic, “as tall as a mountain-top” (*Od.* 10.113), and when Odysseus’s scouts are summoned to the king’s presence he immediately eats one of them, causing a panicked exodus of the Greeks while the Laestrygonians, hurling huge boulders from the cliffs, destroy all but one of Odysseus’s ships. Like Polyphemus, the Laestrygonians do not have the technology to produce advanced weapons.<sup>37</sup> And the presence of a social hierarchy does not guarantee what the Greek considered civilized behavior: the farther away one goes from Greece, the more barbaric and monstrous the races. After their unfortunate encounters with the Cyclops and the Laestrygonians, Odysseus’s crew use these episodes as warnings to Odysseus not to be too curious to explore, as when he wants to investigate Circe’s island.

### MAN-EATING WITCHES

Enough witches and hybrid witch-like creatures—including serpentine ones!—appear in classical literature to warrant at least a brief mention in a discussion of monsters. Although not falling explicitly into any tale type, the story of Odysseus’s encounter with the witch Circe bears some resemblance to the story of “Hansel and Gretel” (ATU 327A). Circe lives in a house deep in the woods on an island—again, a typically liminal habitat, isolated from the societies of men. When Odysseus and his remaining ship land there, he climbs a hill to scout the area and sees smoke rising up from a habitation “through the dense thickets and woods” (*Od.* 10.150).<sup>38</sup> He sends a band of men to investigate, and in a forest glen they find a house of polished stone and hear a female voice singing sweetly. Enticed by the sound, all but one of the men enter; they meet Circe, who offers them food and drink. But she has drugged the wine, and with her wand turns the men into swine and drives them into the sties. The man who waited outside runs to warn Odysseus who, with help from the god Hermes, threatens Circe and compels her to disenchant his men.

The story of Circe clearly has details in common with “Hansel and Gretel.” Odysseus and his men are lost, having been blown off course by a storm; they are also running short on supplies and constantly need to replenish their food stores. Similarly, Hansel and Gretel have been cast out from their home because their father cannot afford to feed the family, and they become lost in the woods when birds eat Hansel’s trail of breadcrumbs. They then follow a sweetly singing bird until they come to a house made of cake with windows of transparent sugar, and a seemingly friendly old woman greets them in and invites them in for a wonderful meal; this resembles Odysseus’s men being drawn by Circe’s song, taking heart at seeing what appears to be a civilized dwelling in the middle

of nowhere, and being kindly received and generously fed. While Circe is not literally a man-eater, she preys on men (her reasons are never made explicit). And just as Circe suddenly turns on Odysseus's men, so the witch abruptly turns on Hansel and Gretel, dragging the boy into the stable and imprisoning him there, with plans to fatten and eat him. Clever Gretel tricks the witch, trapping her in the oven and freeing Hansel; Odysseus "tricks" Circe by using a form of magic to block her spell.<sup>39</sup>

Graham Anderson suggests a different tale from antiquity as a potential "Hansel and Gretel" prototype (2020: 91–3). Told by the Greek author Philostratus (late second to mid-third century CE) in his hagiographical account of the sage Apollonius of Tyana, the story presents a creature referred to as both a *lamia* and an *empousa*, here indicating a female shape-shifting monster that takes on the form of a human woman to seduce men, fatten them up, and feast on them. Apollonius sees through the creature's disguise and saves the young man she was targeting, pointing out to him that her luxurious house, with all its fancy trappings and feasts, was an illusion (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 4.25). The moral seems to be that only philosophical discipline can conquer the allure of worldly pleasure: as Anderson explains, this story contains the stereotyped motif of the disciple brought down to earth by his master, and ashamed of his worldly attachments—the typical philosopher's rebuke to a backsliding pupil, who has deluded himself into thinking that he can have a lasting relationship with a courtesan living beyond her means and on the lookout for gullible clients (Anderson 1986: 141). We can also note the similarity between this story and "The King and the Lamia" (ATU 411), in which a king falls in love with a girl who, unbeknown to him, is actually a snake-woman.

While the terms *lamia* and *empousa* were sometimes used interchangeably, the *lamia* in ancient Greek folklore, unlike the *empousa*, was frequently depicted as part serpent. Moreover, the term *lamia* was sometimes applied to witches.<sup>40</sup> In earlier stories, *lamiae* preyed on infants, but during the Roman Empire, the creatures changed in the literature from infant-killing spirits to sexual monsters that seduced young men into a false sense of security, only to devour them, as in Philostratus's story. A variant of this story is embedded in Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (itself the earliest complete version of ATU 425) though there the (alleged) shape-shifting snake-creature is male (Felton 2013). Psyche's sisters, envious of her marriage to an unseen and unidentified but incredibly wealthy and godlike husband, conspire to ruin her relationship. They say that her unseen husband is really an immense serpent dripping deadly poison from its bloody jaws, and they claim that he is only pampering her with luxuries and feeding her rich meals to fatten her and her unborn child before devouring them both. She eventually sees for herself that this is not the case.

On the one hand, the Greeks and Romans did not generally perceive witches to be "monstrous" creatures on the level of a Typhoeus, Cyclops, or Medusa

because most witch-characters in classical literature, apart from the demi-goddesses Circe and Medea, were human women who distorted their societal roles as wives and mothers by practicing magic. On the other hand, witches such as Medea, Canidia and her fellows (Sagana, Veia, Folia), and the especially notorious Erictho, killed men and children for various reasons, including the use of human body parts in magic spells.<sup>41</sup> Both witches and *lamiae* provided fodder for bedtime stories told to frighten children into behaving, as well as providing moral lessons for young men and women as to proper behavior. The descriptions of Roman witches as animalistic—howling like wolves, digging the earth with their fingers, rending flesh with their teeth—hearken back to the male/culture vs. female/nature dichotomy, aligning these “impious” women with the more traditional monsters of classical stories.

## WEREWOLVES AND GHOSTS

The monstrous quality of witches and similar entities such as *lamiae* relates, among other things, to their seductive, magical (e.g., shape-shifting), and in some cases man-eating tendencies. Similarly, werewolves and ghosts were creatures considered monstrous because of their supernatural qualities, though in relation to the gigantic, often-horrific monsters found in Hesiod and “The Dragon-Slayer” tales, werewolves and ghosts are described in less terrifying terms, posing little to no threat to entire populations and only rarely causing physical harm to humans. The Greeks and Romans seem to have conceived of werewolves principally as men who turned entirely into wolves rather than as hybrid wolf-men, while ghosts were often literally referred to as *monstra* both in the original sense of being portents (which they often were) and unnatural. Both creatures also inherently exhibited liminal qualities, werewolves being neither human nor wolf, and ghosts being neither alive nor dead (in the sense of having moved on to an afterlife).

Several stories about werewolves and ghosts have survived from the ancient world. The most famous werewolf story from antiquity appears in the Roman author Petronius’s *Satyricon* (first century CE) in the context of stories being told around a dinner table.<sup>42</sup> Niceros, the narrator, describes the unusual event that occurred when he set out to visit his girlfriend at her country villa:

My master was away at Capua to deal with something or other. This gave me the opportunity to convince one of the guests at the inn to accompany me on my journey at least as far as the fifth milestone. He was a soldier, brave as hell. We left around cock-crow; the moon was shining as brightly as if it were noon. We arrived at the cemetery,<sup>43</sup> and my companion headed for the tombstones to pee, while I hummed and counted the tombs. When I looked around at my friend, he had taken off all his clothes and placed them next to



the road .... He urinated in a circle around his clothes, then suddenly turned into a wolf!

The wolf then howled and fled into the forest. Niceros continues,

At first, I was so stunned I felt completely disoriented. Then I approached his clothes and tried to pick them up, but they had turned to stone. At that point I was a nervous wreck, drawing my sword and hacking at every shadow until I arrived at my sweetheart's villa. I walked in pale as a ghost, having nearly died of fright; sweat was streaming down my face, my eyes were wide with fear, and they were scarcely able to revive me. My Melissa, amazed that I had arrived so late, said, "If you'd gotten here just a bit earlier, you would at least have been able to help us! A wolf got onto the grounds and attacked the whole herd—it was like a slaughterhouse out there! But it didn't get the last laugh. As the wolf was fleeing, one of our servants pierced it through the neck with a spear."

After I heard this, I couldn't get a wink of sleep. As soon as daylight came I ran home as quickly as I could. When I got to the spot where the clothes had been turned to stone, I found nothing but blood. When at last I arrived back at the inn, my soldier friend was lying in bed sick as a dog, and a doctor was tending to his neck. Then it dawned on me that the man was a shape-shifter (*versipellis*),<sup>44</sup> and after that I could no longer eat at the same table with him—not even if you had held a knife to my throat.

(61.6–62.13)

Several details here become standard in later werewolf stories, including the presence of the full moon, a liminal time of day (dawn), the wound on the wolf showing up on the man, and the theme of culture (clothing) vs. nature (nakedness), the last of which demonstrates how the man in wolf form has become pure animal. Shedding the trappings of civilization and yielding to his ravenous, dangerous, primitive essence, the werewolf, like other monsters discussed in this chapter, reflects the ongoing tension not only between humankind and the natural world, but also between the contrasting aspects of man's inner self.

Some ancient Greek and Roman authors seem to have considered werewolves as related to ghosts, as in a story from the second century CE that tells of a ghost—more of a revenant, really, given that it had physical form and could hurt people—that was also depicted as wearing a wolfskin (Pausanias 6.6.7–11; see also Ogden 2002: 175). But the majority of ghosts in antiquity were true apparitions: insubstantial entities whose mere presence terrified the people who encountered them, but that could not directly cause people physical harm. Such is the case in the earliest complete haunted house story, found in Pliny the Younger's *Letters* (late first to early second century CE). It contains many familiar

motifs and serves as a prototype for the tale known as “The Youth Who Wanted to Learn What Fear Is” (ATU 326, and 326A “Soul Released from Torment”). The story starts with a description of the house and its ghost:

In Athens there was a large and roomy house, but it had a bad reputation and an unhealthy air. Through the silence of the night you could hear the sound of metal clashing and, if you listened more closely, you could make out the clanking of chains, first from far off, then from close by. Soon there appeared a phantom, an old man, emaciated and filthy, with a long beard and unkempt hair. He wore shackles on his legs and chains on his wrists, shaking them as he walked. And so the inhabitants of this house spent many dreadful nights lying awake in fear; illness and eventually death overtook them through lack of sleep and their increasing dread, for even when the ghost was absent, the memory of the horrible apparition preyed on their minds, and their fear itself lasted longer than the cause of the fear. Eventually the house was deserted and condemned to solitude, left entirely to the ghost. But the house was advertised, in case someone unaware of the evil should wish to buy or rent it.

A philosopher named Athenodorus, visiting Athens, hears the story and decides to rent the house. He sends his servants to the back rooms and keeps a vigil, focusing on his studies:

At first, as usual, there was only the night silence. Then came the sound of iron clashing, of chains clanking; yet Athenodorus did not raise his eyes or put down his stylus. Instead he concentrated his attention on his work. Then the din grew even louder; now it was at the threshold—now it was inside the room with him! Athenodorus turned, saw, and recognized the ghost. It was standing there, beckoning to him with its finger. Rather than answering the summons, he motioned with his hand that the ghost should wait a while, and turned back to his writing. The ghost continued rattling its chains right over the philosopher’s head .... With no further delay, the philosopher picked up his lamp and followed the phantom. The specter walked very slowly, as if weighted down by the chains. Then it walked to the courtyard of the house and suddenly vanished, abandoning its comrade.

(Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.27.5–10)

Athenodorus marked the spot where the ghost disappeared, and then advised the local authorities to have the spot excavated. When they did, they found a skeleton entwined in rusted chains. Once the bones were gathered and given a public burial, “the house was no longer troubled by spirits” (7.27.10–11).

Classical literature contains several other variants on haunted house stories (see Felton 1999), as well as other tale types related to ghosts. In one rhetorical

exercise attributed to the Roman educator and speech-writer Quintilian, a young man falls ill and dies. His ghost begins appearing to his mother in the evenings, staying and speaking with her until dawn to comfort her, until her husband puts a stop to the uncanny visits (pseudo-Quintilian, *Declamation* 10, c. first century CE). The story thus presents a variant on “The Child’s Grave” (ATU 769; cf. Hansen 2002: 92–5). A fragmentary story from Phlegon of Tralles (second century CE) may comprise a variant of “Son of the Witch” (ATU 425B), with the gender roles reversed: here, we have the equivalent of a supernatural bride rather than bridegroom, as the ghost of a young woman named Philinnion returns (in solid bodily form, i.e., as a revenant) to her home, has sex with a male lodger there, and generally terrifies her parents and the townspeople with her unexpected presence (*Mirabilia* 1; cf. Hansen 2002: 394; 1980). Among other themes, such stories reflect our common anxieties about death and the afterlife, and express the horror and grief we feel upon losing beloved family members.

## CONCLUSION

Medusa, Cerberus, Cyclopes, Harpies, the Minotaur, and more—classical antiquity has given us many familiar monsters that remain nearly as well known today as they were over two thousand years ago. In ancient folktale such monsters often filled the role of antagonist, to be fought and conquered by heroes such as Perseus, Heracles, Odysseus, and Theseus in a triumph of civilized man over irrational nature. This chapter opened with a discussion of how monsters tend to reflect various cultural anxieties; different monsters across various time periods and a multitude of settings—whether ancient or modern—can represent multifaceted and shifting societal concerns. But taken all together, the monsters of myth, legend, and folktale function to reflect our fears and hopes about the mysteries of the natural world, our place in it, and our ability to control or adapt to our environment. A vastly destructive entity such as Typhoeus may represent the chaos of a disordered world needing structure; dangerous, creatures such as Medusa, Scylla, and Charybdis may function as stand-ins for fear of the female; moreover, inasmuch as they devour humans, as do various other sea monsters as well as giants, Scylla and Charybdis along with these other creatures can represent literal and metaphorical fear of being consumed; werewolves may reflect humans’ fear of the animal and irrational aspects of our own nature; ghosts may speak to our fear of death and hope for an afterlife. All of these creatures and their kin express these and innumerable other anxieties about the nature of the universe and our existence within it. Monsters, as an attempt to express what we struggle against and strive to suppress and conquer, compel us to look inward, to face our fears, and to meditate upon what it means to be human.

## CHAPTER SIX

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# Space

### *Borders, Fringes, and Thresholds in the Ancient Folktale*

JULIA DOROSZEWSKA AND JANEK KUCHARSKI

To speak nowadays of a “spatial turn” in the study of literature and culture amounts to a long-overdue statement. Even in the field of Classics, often half a step behind other disciplines in adopting new theories of interpreting ancient history and its artifacts, the study of space is now a well-entrenched approach, one that demands no apology and perhaps only little introduction.<sup>1</sup> Space and place have been ushered into the privileged position previously occupied by time. This in turn has led to a new appreciation of known texts and stories; as noted by Pamela Gilbert, for example, “spatial relations would reveal to us a complexity and materiality which was being hidden away by the narrative” (2008: 103). But the spatial turn has also reconfigured our appreciation of culture and literature at a higher level, that of metanarrative. The prolific idea of “Otherness,” for instance, was first conceived of and constructed precisely in terms of space, distance, and conceptual borders, exemplified in Edward Said’s notion of “Orientalism” ([1978] 2004), in which he criticizes constructions of the Orient as simultaneously fabulous and barbaric.

The distinction between space and place is the one problem with which any study of the spatial dimension of literature and culture has to come to terms. For the purpose of this chapter, we conceive of space as a general and abstract idea, with place as its concrete actualization. “A room,” for instance, is an abstract *space*, created by way of setting up borders, and negotiated through

the inside-outside dialectic. “The room” (in which I live, for instance) is, by contrast, a particular *place*, individual and personalized, and, most importantly, endowed with diachronic quality: it has a beginning, previous owners, events taking place within it, and so on. In short, it has a history. “A room,” on the other hand, is ahistorical and exists only through an abstract manipulation of spatial dimensions. A *place*, in other words, is an actualized *space*; as noted by Tim Cresswell, “when humans invest meaning in a portion of space, and then become attached to it in some way ... it becomes a place” (2004: 10).

In this chapter, we provide some insights into the “grammar” that governs the deployment of space in ancient folktales. To be sure, many of the tales obstinately elude any attempt at spatial analysis. In many cases this may be an accident of preservation: the element of space may simply be lost in the (usually abbreviated) form in which the ancient counterpart of an international tale has survived to our times. For instance, in modern traditions many tales of an impossible task, such as making a rope out of sand or counting the stars, presuppose a contract with the devil, and therefore some form of spatial relationship between the two parties (hell–earth, down–up). Their ancient counterparts, however, reduced to the barebones of a proverbial expression such as “you’re braiding a rope out of sand,” provide only the impossible task, without any additional embellishments (Hansen 2002: 256–7). In many other cases, however, a closer look at the spatial grammar may allow us to determine how the abstract becomes the concrete—how space becomes place. Sometimes it will also provide an insight into the spatial relationships between a story’s characters. For, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us, “space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible” (1962: 284). Space and its grammar therefore need not merely provide a static backdrop, or repository if you will, for the “production” of place; they are also a crucial factor in the dynamics of a folktale’s unfolding plot, even when the tale is truncated or reduced to the point of a single expression.

## DISTANCE

The most obvious way in which space becomes a factor in a folktale is distance. For instance, in the magical folktale—the structure of which has been unraveled in the influential analysis by Vladimir Propp (1968)—spatial distance provides the default framework for the hero’s quest. A case in point may be found in the wanderings and return of Odysseus.<sup>2</sup> The hero leaves home and travels to a far-away realm (Troy; the fabulous lands of the West), in the quest for a sought-after object (Ithaca); he finally returns home, usually unrecognized (beggar’s disguise), accomplishes a difficult task (the bow contest), punishes an impostor

who seeks to take his place (the suitors), and marries the girl (reunites with his wife, Penelope). The entire story is also triggered by a temporary absence of the hero's family member, which sets the stage for the entire plot to unfold; in the *Odyssey*, however, this motif is found in the story of Telemachus, Odysseus's son. To be sure, some of Propp's folktale "functions"—structural elements such as departure, absention, spatial transference, and unrecognized arrival—can also be negotiated by other means than distance (see below); one cannot deny, however, that spatial remoteness constitutes the primary framework on which the plot of a model folktale is usually mapped. Distance, though on a much smaller scale, is also frequently a factor by which the dynamics of many animal tales are negotiated, in particular those involving the interaction of predator and prey. Finally, various types of folktale are provided with a peculiar, exotic setting, one also defined primarily by distance: the distance that separates them from the known world, and therefore liberates them from its constraints, thus allowing wondrous things to occur.

It is with this last aspect of spatial distancing that we wish to begin our survey of this phenomenon. As in many international folktales and folktale motifs, the fringes of the known world or that which lies beyond them generally accommodate fabulous phenomena and fabulous peoples. For the ancient Greeks, the North was inhabited by Hyperboreans, a people living in a perpetual state of golden-age bliss. Despite its extreme location, their habitat is a place of temperate climate, and according to the fifth-century BCE Greek poet Pindar, their life is a constant festival and feast, never troubled by diseases, old age, warfare, and toils (*Pythian* 10.29–43). To the south, the Aethiopians are even better off: not only is their land opulent but also their frequent feasts are attended by the gods themselves.<sup>3</sup> Their neighbors to the south, however, the Pygmies, fare much worse, being engaged in constant warfare with the cranes (Hansen 2002: 45–9). In the far west, Atlas held the sky on his shoulders, and unsuccessfully tried to trick Heracles into taking over this unenviable task when the latter went on his eleventh Labor to gather apples from the Garden of the Hesperides. In the east was India, a historical place but one to which legendary and miraculous qualities were attributed. Vaguely placed at the eastern fringes of the known world, India was endowed with utopian traits, such as riches and abundant crops, but also populated by various terrors, such as man-eating beasts or uncommonly poisonous creatures.<sup>4</sup> As such, India came to be regarded as home for prodigies as well as for unusually large animals, insects, trees, fish, and so on (ATU 1960, 1960A–Z; Hansen 2002: 176–87). According to Lucian (second century CE), in a blatantly tall tale intentionally satirizing such stories, similar marvels exist on the Moon—yet another distant setting, not merely beyond the confines of the known world, but beyond the world—earth—itself (*Ver. hist.* 1.10–28).

The Aethiopian or Hyperborean opulence and good fortune provides us with a clear Greco-Roman prototype of the medieval Land of Cockaigne, the imaginary land of abundant food and drink, which was the stuff of many tales across the world (ATU 1930), the common premise being that such bliss is essentially incompatible with the human condition—where periods of happiness are always punctuated by unhappiness—and therefore defines the ordinary experience of humankind. As a result, such stories frequently take the form of tall tales (e.g., the land of Bengodi, the idyllic valley in Boccaccio's *Decameron*) or turn Cockaigne into a façade (e.g., Toyland in *Pinocchio*). The ancient authors were more straightforward, and therefore removed their Cockaignes out of the human experience altogether, whether in terms of space or time, as in Hesiod's golden age in *Works and Days* (109–26). The battles of Pygmies and cranes are an ancient specimen of a similar motif known from other, later traditions: a war waged by dwarves against other large birds (storks, geese, etc.) or giants. Again, all of these tales and motifs share one particular feature: they fix the exotic struggle in an equally exotic, distant place. The stories involving these tropes take the form of tall tales, presenting blatantly false or ridiculously exaggerated events, which in turn warrants their spatial distancing into unverifiable peripheries of the known world. This is also the case with some of their ancient counterparts, some of which are self-consciously false, as with Lucian; others, however, take such marvels at face value, but place them at a safe distance, on the fringes nonetheless, such as India. The tale of Heracles and Atlas, for one, has numerous later counterparts in different cultures: they frequently appear as numskull tales in which a character is duped into believing that the other is holding up the earth, the sky, or the entire universe (ATU 1530). Neither space nor place, however, is an essential factor in any of them. The ancient Greek version, however, which takes things more seriously, aptly places them on the fringes of the world, where the sky is seen to “meet” the earth.

So much for the static use of distance, as a remote setting or a backdrop against which the folktale plots or phenomena unfold. Turning now to the dynamic aspects of distance, which define the relationships of the *dramatis personae*, we find such use of distancing in many stories with a well-established footing in antiquity, although hardly ever in a full sequence of events, *contra* Propp. The motif of the hero's departure is most prominently attested in the ancient variants of the dragon-slayer tale, such as the Perseus myth or that of Jason and the Golden Fleece (ATU 300; Ogden 2013a).<sup>5</sup> In such stories, the antagonist assigns to the hero one or more seemingly impossible tasks, sending him to a far-away land, often at the boundaries of the known world, on a quest for a magical object or token—usually the head or tongue of the dragon—with the intent that the hero fail and/or be killed, never to return from his quest. Colchis, Jason's destination, was fixed by way of various geographical



landmarks on the east coast of the Black Sea, at the foot of Caucasus;<sup>6</sup> although a clearly designated place, it nonetheless occupied a fringe position in the ancient Greek geographical horizon. Perseus, by contrast, traveled beyond it, with the help of gods and magical objects, such as winged sandals that allow him to fly. His assigned quest was to bring back the head of the Gorgon Medusa,<sup>7</sup> but the location of Medusa and her two sisters varied from myth to myth. They were most frequently situated in the far west, on an island on the Atlantic or beyond it, sometimes said to neighbor the Hesperides; other mythographers situated their abode in the far north, in the land of the Hyperboreans (Ogden 2008: 47–50). In any case, as Daniel Ogden notes, “such directional confusion serves well further to convey the otherworldly location of the Gorgon’s home” (48).<sup>8</sup>

In the “unrecognized arrival” function, which concludes the hero’s quest, we find both the spatial and temporal factors at work. A character returns home from far away and after a lengthy absence. His appearance has changed, either due to the passage of time, or—in a specific variation of the theme—a magical intervention. As a result, his family does not recognize him until he displays a certain mark or brand, or accomplishes a specific task (Propp 1968: 60–2). By far the best-known instance of this motif is Odysseus’s return to Ithaca.<sup>9</sup> After ten years fighting at Troy and ten years of distant wanderings he comes home disguised as an elderly beggar, whom only his son and a loyal swineherd are allowed to recognize. His disguise is presented as a divine ruse rather than as due to the working of time and absence, despite the extent of his wanderings. His eventual recognition—through a scar, and later through the shooting contest—is an almost paradigmatic example of Propp’s pattern.<sup>10</sup> Another, more unsettling variation of this theme appears in the brief introduction to the anonymous *Life of Secundus* (second or third century CE), a piece of wisdom literature in the form of a peculiar conversation between the eponymous philosopher and the emperor Hadrian. As a boy, Secundus has been sent away by his parents to study in a distant town. After many years, during which his father has died, he returns home as a Cynic philosopher (another instance of the beggar’s trappings), unrecognized by his mother, and rents a room in her house. During the night, the lonely landlady attempts to unsuccessfully seduce the new tenant, who gently rejects her and goes to bed alone; but in the morning, before departing, he reveals his true identity. Unable to bear the burden of her shame, the mother hangs herself, while her son, recognizing that the matter came to such a terrible end because of his revelation, vowed never to utter a word again (Hansen 2002: 285–6; Perry 1964: 1; 1998: 65).

A different kind of absence, the temporary removal of the hero’s family member or an authority figure, which in turn sets the stage for the entire plot of the folktale, is also negotiated primarily by way of spatial distancing.<sup>11</sup> The story of Secundus, where the father’s “absentation” takes the extreme form of death, already provides a revealing example. Its most salient instances in the

Greco-Roman tradition, however, are the variations on “The Faithless Wife” (ATU 318), an important variant being the biblical tale of Potiphar’s wife, who attempts to seduce Joseph and falsely accuses him of rape when he rejects her. In such tales, the absent family member is the husband; his absence offers his lustful wife an opportunity to proposition her youthful guest or stepson (or brother-in-law, etc.). Yet although the husband’s absence is always presupposed, in only a handful of instances is it actually negotiated by way of explicit spatial distancing. It is emphasized in the classical versions of this folktale, including theatrical dramatizations of the Phaedra myth as well as in the various transformations of this motif in the Greek and Roman novels. In this myth, Phaedra propositions (directly or with the help of intermediaries) her stepson, Hippolytus, while her husband Theseus is away. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428 BCE), the pretext for Theseus’s absence is an embassy to an otherwise unspecified oracle.<sup>12</sup> In the Roman version, Seneca’s *Phaedra* (first century CE), Theseus’ absence results from his four-year-long adventure to the underworld to aid a friend in capturing Persephone (835–42). A version similar to that of Euripides appears in the Roman author Apuleius’s prose novel *Metamorphoses* (second century CE). Here the stepmother has a more active role, as it is she who arranges for her husband to journey to their furthest outlying fields and farms (Apul., *Met.* 10.4), which in turn allows her to attempt to consummate her lust for her stepson. Finally, in the *Ephesian Tale* by the Greek novelist Xenophon of Ephesus (second century CE), we find the same motif but with a much less transgressive twist. The hero, Habrocomes, is taken captive by a pirate captain. When the latter is absent on business, his daughter Manto falls in love with Habrocomes and proposes (through letters) to marry him. Since the youthful hero has already promised himself to another maiden, he refuses Manto’s advances and the story is thus allowed to follow the familiar pattern: upon her father’s return, Manto complains to him that Habrocomes tried to rape her. The pirate throws the young man in jail, and only later comes across his daughter’s correspondence and learns the truth, whereupon he frees Habrocomes.

One story type in which distance is not just a means of separating two agents, or an agent and his object, but an end in itself—a goal to attain, not merely a spatial obstacle to overcome—is the tale of “The Sailor and the Oar” (ATU 1379\*\*), which in classical literature appears as part of the story of Odysseus (Hansen 2014: 245–78). In his trip to Hades, Odysseus receives a prophecy from the ghost of the seer Tiresias about his future, after his return to Ithaca: he will take an oar and go on a journey inland until he encounters a people who know nothing of the sea, use no salt, and will mistake his oar for a winnowing fan (*Od.* 11.119–34). The many international variants of this tale usually end with the oar-carrying mariner settling in the place where his trade is not recognized. In Odysseus’s case, the goal of his expedition—like those of his later counterparts—is not any precise place that happens to be far away; it is the “far away” itself.

## BORDERS

Aside from “distance,” another way in which space emerges as a factor in folktales is when the narrative draws limits and separations, thus creating a conceptual framework for the entire premise. In Propp’s model of the magical tale, spatial or conceptual boundaries are primarily related to the function of interdiction and its transgression. This transgression in turn sets the entire plot on its course.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, space is not the only way to set up a taboo in folktales; there are many other factors, such as temporal boundaries (e.g., midnight), performing certain tasks (e.g., bathing, sleeping), or eating forbidden fruit. Nor are the spatial boundaries deployed exclusively to delimit a forbidden place. Like distance, they may also separate the two domains that shape the dynamics of a hero’s quest,<sup>14</sup> and the qualitative distinction between such domains frequently provides the conceptual underpinning for other folktale motifs, preserved only in the truncated form of brief references or proverbs.

An interdiction negotiated by way of spatial boundaries takes the form of a forbidden place. Its limits may be created by way of a purely conventional prohibition (“do not enter the room”); but such limits can also be further enforced by having the forbidden place locked, hidden, or guarded. In any case, as Hansen aptly notes, the initial interdiction always entails its subsequent violation, and therefore is functionally tantamount to an explicit injunction (“enter the room”) (Hansen 2002: 322; cf. also Propp 1968: 27). This observation, in turn, allows us to trace this motif in its various transformations, where the initial prohibition may move to the background or simply remain understood, without ever being clearly expressed.

In its paradigmatic form of a “forbidden chamber,” as in the Bluebeard tale type (ATU 312), the motif of spatially delimited prohibition does not appear in the Greco-Roman tradition.<sup>15</sup> But it is frequently found reshaped according to the exigencies of the myths or narratives of which it is part. The myth of Pandora’s “box” is perhaps a variant closest to the international model: once opened by the curious woman, it lets out all the evils that plague the human race (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 57–105; cf. *Theogony* 570–91). The problem is that this particular variant of the story is a product of modern times, and not classical antiquity. Not only is the vessel carried by Pandora misidentified as a box (*pyxis*) where the ancient sources clearly identify a large jar (*pithos*, *dolium*),<sup>16</sup> but the motif of prohibition and the alleged female curiosity that violates it never enter the picture in the ancient tradition (Musäus 2004: 29, 121, 126; Panofsky and Panofsky 1962: 8).<sup>17</sup> The modern conundrum is most likely due to a conflation of the Hesiodic Pandora myth with episodes from two of its ancient counterparts: the myth of Erichthonius, and the tale of Cupid and Psyche. In the former, the goddess Athena hides her secret “offspring,” the earth-born infant Erichthonius, in a chest, and entrusts the chest to the three daughters of the first Athenian king, Cecrops. She forbids the girls to

open it, but they are overcome with curiosity and the goddess's interdiction is followed by its violation and the lamentable consequence of the girls' death.<sup>18</sup> In Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (*Metamorphoses* 4.28–6.24, ATU 425B; see below), Psyche gives in to her vanity and despite an explicit interdiction not to open the box (*pyxis*) carrying a bit of Persephone's beauty, opens it (Figure 6.1) (cf. Musäus 2004: 181; Panofsky and Panofsky 1962: 16–19).

As a result, she is afflicted by a deathlike sleep (6.16–21). This box may well have been the source of confusion regarding the vessel carried by Hesiod's Pandora. In any case, the forbidden place in the stories of Erichthonius and Psyche is shrunk to the dimensions of the box, but otherwise the stories follow the familiar gendered pattern of interdiction, female curiosity, violation, and subsequent misfortune. The pattern, however, is sometimes found reversed, with the man giving in to curiosity (or rather lack of restraint) and not the woman. This is the case in Babrius's version of the story of Pandora's box, opened by an anonymous man (Babrius, *Fab.* 58.3–6), as well as Apuleius's description, elsewhere in his *Metamorphoses*, of the narrator Lucius's transformation: observing a witch using an ointment to turn herself into an owl and excitedly wishing to do the same, Lucius steals some of the ointment from her box (*pyxis*)—but instead of an owl, finds himself turned into an ass (3.21–4).

As mentioned above, the forbidden place may also be guarded, as with Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, no formal interdiction to the hero is issued here; rather, the owner of the marvelous object, King Aeetes, encourages him to go see it. But the Fleece hangs on a tree in a grove sacred to the war god Ares, a location already excluded from everyday spatial experience; additionally, the Fleece is guarded by a huge serpent that never sleeps. Aeetes' daughter Medea, in the role of "helper maiden," uses magic to lull the serpent to sleep and thus allows Jason to steal the Fleece, but the transgression has numerous negative consequences including the death of Aeetes' son and the eventual downfall of Jason. A peculiar variant of the forbidden place is the labyrinth:<sup>20</sup> a place easy to enter, but nearly impossible to leave. In Greek myth, it is built to house the monstrous Minotaur, which further adds to its dangerous nature, when compared to other labyrinth traditions. As in the story of the Golden Fleece, we know that the hero, in this case Theseus, is expected to enter the forbidden space, and indeed volunteers to do so (Figure 6.2). He too is aided by a "helper maiden," King Minos's daughter Ariadne, who provides him with the means to escape (a ball of yarn, to mark his path), which he successfully does after killing the Minotaur. Ultimately both girls come to regret their actions: they are abandoned by the men they have helped.<sup>21</sup>

A different yet related pattern of interdiction and transgression is the taboo of sight. Usually it also presupposes a violation of some sort of border, but such borders are defined more vaguely than those of forbidden spaces. A good example here is the case of Pentheus, the tragic protagonist of Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 BCE): as



FIGURE 6.1: John William Waterhouse, *Psyche Opening the Golden Box*, 1904. Public domain.

he loses his mind in his doomed struggle against the god Dionysus, he submits to his voyeuristic urge of spying on the maenads in the wilderness of the mountains despite explicit warnings (813–17). Mount Cithaeron, site of the Bacchic rites, becomes thus delimited by way of a conceptual interdiction, which is subsequently violated and in turn paves the way for terrible misfortune in the form of Pentheus's gruesome, Dionysiac demise as the maenads tear him limb from limb, enacting the Bacchic ritual of *sparagmos*, in which live animals are dismembered.<sup>22</sup> A much less





FIGURE 6.2: Theseus dragging the Minotaur from the Labyrinth. Interior of Greek cup, c. 440–430 BCE. Attributed to the Codrus Painter. Public domain.

violent variant of the forbidden sight motif is found in the second-century CE satirist Lucian's variant on "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (ATU 325\*). In his *Philopseudes* one of the storytellers, Eucrates, narrates the tale of how he spied on his mentor, an Egyptian priest/magician named Pancrates, when the latter performed a magical spell that temporarily turned an ordinary pestle into an obedient servant. Eucrates does this in spite of Pancrates' explicit refusal to teach him the spell—a clear interdiction, further underscored by the fact that Pancrates was willing to oblige him in every other respect. As expected, Eucrates' transgression has lamentable consequences, when the "servant" he creates from a pestle to carry water fails to stop because Eucrates had not learned the last part of the spell—and the automaton nearly floods the entire house (33–6; cf. Hansen 2002: 36–8). Yet another story focused around the motif of forbidden sight is that of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Here the interdiction is also negotiated by way of spatial boundaries, though somewhat differently. Having won permission for his beloved wife Eurydice to be released from the underworld, Orpheus is prohibited from looking at her until both make it to the world of the living. But, concerned for her safety, he disobeys this interdiction and glances back at her, which forces Eurydice to return to the dead.<sup>23</sup>

Probably the best-known ancient Greek story that combines the motif of the forbidden chamber with its voyeuristic transformation into forbidden sight is the story of Gyges and Candaules in the *Histories* of the fifth-century BCE Greek author Herodotus (1.8–12; cf. Hansen 2002: 316–27). Gyges begins as the favorite and most trusted bodyguard of the Lydian king Candaules. The king, infatuated by the beauty of his own wife to an inappropriate extent, wishes to show her off and orders Gyges to hide in the royal bedroom so that he might see the queen naked. This constitutes a clear violation of both Greek *and* Lydian taboos against seeing women naked, as Herodotus makes abundantly clear: “among the Lydians—indeed, among nearly all foreign peoples—it is considered an immense dishonor for even a *man* to be seen naked” (1.10.3, emphasis in the original). Ultimately, the consequences of this transgression fall upon its very instigator. The queen, aware of the ruse (Figure 6.3), presents Gyges with an alternative: either kill Candaules—becoming king himself and taking her as wife—or be killed. Gyges chooses the former.

Apart from negotiating the motif of interdiction in its various guises, spatial borders also serve other purposes in the ancient folktales. Some of these stories focus on the dynamics between this and the netherworld. The borders separating one from another are normally fixed and impermeable, which naturally sets the stage for their inevitable transgression. In the Greco-Roman tradition, the paradigmatic transgressor is Sisyphus, whose story is a variant of the international folktale of tricking Death (or the Devil, ATU 330)—which Sisyphus does twice.

On the first occasion, Sisyphus had offended Zeus, who ordered Thanatos, god of death, to bring Sisyphus to the land of the dead. But Sisyphus tricked Thanatos and chained him up, thus remaining among the living until the gods released Thanatos, who then claimed Sisyphus. But he eluded death on this occasion as well, having ordered his wife to deny him the customary funeral rites, so that upon his arrival in the underworld he was allowed to go back to earth to arrange a proper funeral—but instead simply continued his life. When he finally died again, he was punished for his multiple transgressions by what is now the eponymous Sisyphean task: he was condemned to roll a huge rock eternally up a hill, as once he reached the summit the rock rolled down again and he had to start over (Figure 6.4).<sup>24</sup>

Of other forms of spatial boundaries deployed in Greco-Roman folktales, one has proven to be particularly rich in signification: the distinction between





FIGURE 6.3: Jean Léon Gérôme, *King Candaules*, 1859. Here Candaules's wife sees Gyges trying to exit unnoticed. Public domain.

urban and country space, along with its metaphorical extension, civilization and wilderness, or culture and nature. Paradigmatic here is the animal fable of the country and city mouse (ATU 112),<sup>25</sup> which actually subverts the conventional distinction by presenting the city as the unknown, unpredictable, dangerous, if opulent place, while turning the country into a place of modest and foreseeable safety. The country mouse once entertained his friend from the city with a rather frugal meal; the city mouse in turn, thinking little of the humble food he was offered, persuaded his friend to follow him to a feast in the city. As they gorged themselves on leftovers from a banquet, however, they are surprised by large dogs who enter the chamber and they flee in panic. In the end, the country mouse departs, stating that he prefers his modest diet and the safety of his country home to the fancy food offered to him by his friend from the city. The shift is no mere idiosyncrasy: on the one hand, it may reflect the growing appreciation and idealization of the rustic mode of life by the Hellenistic and Roman poets culminating in the utopian Arcadia of Virgil's *Eclogues* (Snell 1953: 281–309; Jenkyns 1989), while on the other it also turns the spatial boundaries into a cautionary tale against wealth and gluttony (Rudd 1966: 245; Adrados 1999–2003: 3:509).

In its more straightforward guise we find the distinction between civilization and wilderness deployed in a myth about Peleus, whose son was the Greek warrior Achilles. Exiled by his father Aeacus, Peleus finds refuge in Thessaly at the court of

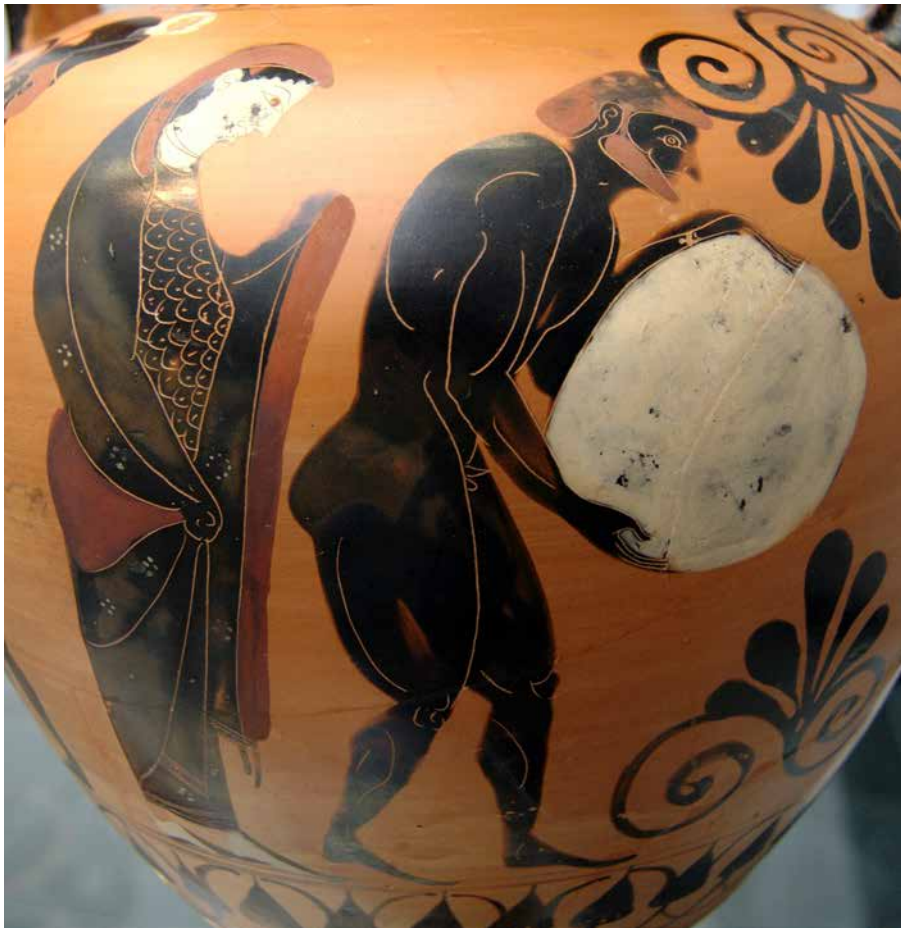


FIGURE 6.4: *Nekyia*: Persephone supervising Sisyphus pushing his rock in the underworld. Side A of an Athenian black-figure vase, c. 530 BCE. From Vulci, in Etruria, Italy. Public domain.

King Acastus. In another variant on the “Potiphar’s Wife” tale, the king’s wife is consumed by desire for her husband’s guest, but Peleus roundly rejects her, so she accuses him of attempted rape.<sup>26</sup> Believing the false accusations of his unfaithful wife, King Acastus abandons Peleus unarmed in wilderness, expecting him to perish there. Peleus is eventually saved through divine intervention. In terms of spatial distinctions, wilderness here represents the unknown and the dangerous, characteristics underscored by Peleus’s lack of weapons and consequent inability to defend himself against wild animals and other potential threats.

Yet another use of spatial boundaries is found in the tale underlying one of Aristotle’s aphorisms used to illustrate the problem of innate or natural anger. A

father was being dragged by his son, but on the threshold of the house cried for him to stop, for it was only thus far that he himself used to drag his own father (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1149b; ATU 980; Hansen 2002: 117–18). The story provides an example of generationally replicated (i.e., innate) violent disposition. The threshold itself does not seem to have any particular significance here. It is an arbitrarily placed boundary, an expendable spatial prop, a comic limit within which an otherwise unthinkable act suddenly becomes unobjectionable—for the point of the story is not that the father is dragged to the threshold, but simply that he is dragged. There seems to be no reason for including this spatial marker in the fable other than dark humor.

### LIMINAL SPACE

With this literal threshold we come to our final, if more metaphorical example of how space can be deployed to provide the folktale with a conceptual framework: liminality. In his seminal work *The Rites of Passage* (1909), ethnographer Arnold van Gennep observed that the transition presupposed in the eponymous rites consists of three elements: separation, liminality, and incorporation. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, who expanded upon Van Gennep's ideas, thought of liminal space precisely as a threshold delimiting various stages in life. According to him, during the liminal phase of transition rituals, the initiands are usually set in a wild, desolate space that contradicts the structured and civilized space of human settlements (Turner 1967, 1969, 1974). Folktales, too, are often structured around various forms of status changes; such transformations most frequently relate to coming-of-age rituals and concern a change from boy to man or maiden into woman. However, the folktale accommodates a variety of other possible transitions and transformations, including social status (such as transitions from free to slave, rich to poor, prince to peasant, and vice versa), or even the passage from life to death and vice versa (as in the Sisyphus myth). Many such changes occur in distinct places, both natural and artificial. Some of those places, furthermore, constitute natural borders (e.g., the seashore or the river bank) or artificial borders (e.g., the threshold of a building), and therefore may be imbued with liminality.

Let us begin with the extremely popular Indo-European tales that represent the coming of age—the transition from boy to man or girl to woman (Hitch 2010: 109; cf. Dowden 1999 in Padilla 1999: 225–6).<sup>27</sup> The most revealing examples are found in the already discussed myths of Theseus and Ariadne, and Jason and Medea. Both metaphorically depict the entry into adulthood: a young man leaves his own home, meets and overcomes obstacles with a maiden's help, and takes her as his bride while dealing with her father's inevitable hostility and jealousy. The girl, meanwhile, transfers her loyalty from her father to her husband and leaves her childhood home.

As mentioned above regarding the myth of Theseus and Ariadne, the Labyrinth, a “forbidden place,” houses a monster, the Minotaur. Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis uses the labyrinth as an apt topological metaphor for the unconscious. As Carl Jung argues, the unconscious is the place where the “shadow” lurks, the unconscious, unknown (and therefore dark), and “unwelcome side of our nature,” instinctive and irrational (Hart 2008: 97; see also Salman 2008: 72–3); a monster to be confronted and tamed or vanquished entirely as one becomes an adult. It is an indispensable element of transition and growth (Jung 1964: 170–1). This is precisely the task undertaken by Theseus, and the chaotic interior of the labyrinth symbolically represents various possibilities one may choose to become someone different; thus, the labyrinth enables and reflects his change of status. In his journey through the labyrinth and his corresponding rite of passage, Theseus is aided by Ariadne, a young woman also on the threshold of adulthood. She helps the hero in defiance of her father, from whom she will finally escape with her lover, upon his safe return—as a man—from the depths of the shadow. Facing death thus enables his transition to manhood.

A similar use of space and place in a coming-of-age narrative appears in the myth of the Golden Fleece. When it comes to the tasks and transition of the hero, topography again plays a prominent role: the story is set in Colchis, located on the fringes of the known world. In this liminal location there is a distinct place, one also endowed with liminal qualities: the sanctuary of Ares, where the Golden Fleece is on display. Guarded by a serpent, another shadow figure whom the hero must tame or vanquish, it becomes the place of his transition to manhood. Like Theseus, Jason accomplishes this with the help of a maiden, in this case Medea, who like Ariadne must necessarily defy her father in the process. Their escape from Colchis does not complete her transition to womanhood, however. According to Apollonius, Aeetes’ relentless pursuit led the Argonauts to the other end of the known world, the island of Phaeacia (Scheria), and only there is Jason and Medea’s relationship consummated and Medea officially declared Jason’s wife, which in turn ends Aeetes’ pursuit (4.253–1213). Phaeacia itself, already mentioned centuries earlier in Homer’s *Odyssey*, has liminal connotations as a frontier between the fairy tale and the real world but also as an isolated autonomous piece of land in the middle of the sea.<sup>28</sup> Thus Jason and Medea completed the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The liminal space in the folktale can also take the form of the *locus amoenus*, the “pleasant place,” an idealized, lovely space of safety, pleasure, and comfort. Most revealingly, such a space features in the Cupid and Psyche story, which among all the ancient stories most resembles fairy tale as we conceive of it (ATU 425B; Hansen 2002: 100–14).<sup>29</sup> This long and elaborate story appears as an embedded narrative within Apuleius’s novel *Metamorphoses*. In the tale, Psyche’s

otherworldly beauty results in the envy of the goddess Venus, who condemns the girl to marry a “monster” via a funerary marriage procession culminating on a mountain cliff. The cliff, besides its possibly phallic connotations, may also signify the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety experienced by the bride on the threshold of marriage. As Sophia Papaioannou notes, the wedding, here likened to a funeral, is like death itself, a “transition to the unknown” (1998: 318–19). Psyche is thus left alone on the cliff, but then the West Wind arrives and carries her gently down to a valley and, to Psyche’s astonishment, a palace. Her mysterious husband spends nights with her, hiding both his identity and his face from her. Since he is in fact, as the reader eventually discovers, Venus’s son, Cupid himself, his dwelling reflects his unearthly nature. It is a lovely royal palace of unusual beauty and divine craftsmanship, full of intricately wrought treasures, located in a flowery valley protected by surrounding mountains. Psyche is there attended upon by invisible servants and entertained by invisible musicians. Despite the charming circumstances, Psyche is initially terrified, as many brides are. In such isolation from the outer world Psyche loses her virginity and becomes a woman.

A number of other stories treat liminal spaces featuring a rite of passage and its accompanying change of status. As one Aesopic fable goes,

A poor man who was sick promised the gods a sacrifice of 100 oxen if they would cure him. Wishing to test him, the gods quickly made him recover. But since he had no real oxen, he fashioned a hundred oxen of dough and burned them on an altar, declaring that he had fulfilled his vow. The gods, intent on punishing the deceit, sent him a dream in which they urged him to go to the beach, where he would fetch a thousand drachmas. He happily ran to the shore where pirates captured him. When they sold him, he fetched a thousand drachmas.

(P 28, G 477; Adrados 1999–2003: 3:40, 1:526; ATU 778;  
and see Hansen 2002: 435–9)

Thus the beach, a natural border between land and sea, serves as a liminal place in which a transition of status occurs: a free man suddenly becomes a slave. Yet another, more disturbing transition—that from life to death—is also set at the seashore: the story goes that Ibycus of Rhegium, a sixth-century BCE poet, was ambushed by pirates, and in his last moments cried out to a swarm of cranes to witness his death. Some time later, the murderers, certain they had escaped with impunity, saw a swarm of cranes, and jokingly said: “Look, the avengers of Ibycus!” But they were overheard and subsequently dragged to the authorities for punishment, while the phrase “cranes of Ibycus” became a proverbial expression for unexpected punishment (*Palatine Anthology* 7.745).<sup>30</sup>

The seashore can be also associated with change from the unknown to the known, such as a revelation. Sophronius of Jerusalem recounts how a certain

man, paralyzed by a magical binding spell, was healed by saints Cyrus and John. Appearing to the man in a dream, they commanded him to have himself carried to the seashore. Upon seeing a fisherman casting his net into the sea, he was to agree with him on a reward for the next thing he drew from the water; this thing was to bring back his health. The man followed the saints' order and everything happened the way they predicted: the fisherman brought out a basket, which was eventually opened in the sanctuary of Cyrus and John; it contained a figurine resembling the paralyzed man, but with his hands and feet bound with four nails. When the nails were removed from the figurine, the man regained his health. In this story the sea is a metaphor for the unknown, the mysterious, the hidden, and symbolizes infinite possibilities that can be "fished out."<sup>31</sup>

Another kind of a boundary between the water and the land appears in the fourth- or fifth-century CE *Life and Martyrdom* of Athenogenes, which also displays certain fairy-tale motifs.<sup>32</sup> The narrative tells of the Gothic invasion of the Pontus region on the Black Sea in the third century CE, during which many people were taken captive. Athenogenes, after collecting money, travels to the barbarian lands to ransom the captives. On his way, he finds a child bound near a lake, offered by the locals as a sacrifice to a dragon. He frees the boy and kills the monster, hitting it three times on the head with his stick. Here the natural lakeshore boundary corresponds to the sacrificial ritual, which signifies death for the boy, whereas it is eventually the dragon which loses its life there, thanks to Athenogenes' intervention.

Bridges, an instance of an artificial liminal place, feature in the Roman proverbial expression "sexagenarians from the bridge." According to the second-century CE scholar Festus, some people say that after Rome was liberated from the Gauls there was a food shortage, and everyone sixty years old was thrown from a bridge into the Tiber. Only one man, displaying filial piety, chose to hide his elderly father and thus save his life. When this became known, the young man was forgiven and the elderly were allowed to live (ATU 981; Hansen 2002: 469–75).<sup>33</sup> Again, the liminal nature of the bridge reflects the passage from life to death. The age of sixty is not coincidental here, as it was considered liminal as well among the Romans, as for them it was when old age began (Hansen 2002: 473).<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSION

With this brief survey we hope to have provided a glimpse into the "grammar" governing the deployment of space and place in the ancient folktale. To be sure, the manipulation of space in ancient folk narratives goes hand in hand with time and other categories to comply with the exigencies of the genre to which they are adapted. Since many versions of tales appear as legends, they



are accordingly populated with historical or allegedly historical personages, frequently set in a definite time, and—most importantly—in real or allegedly real places of the Greek and Roman world, unlike the more generic heroes of myth, living in an indefinitely remote past, found in various international folktales (Hansen 2002: 13–16). This specificity, or lack of it, can explain, for instance, the frequency of the sea or the seashore appearing in the ancient tales, as well as many other idiosyncratic settings, with the Cretan labyrinth given pride of place among the most peculiar ones.

Perhaps, generic conventions such as those found in epic or tragedy also account for a slightly different, more serious, and more elevated tone than is usually expected from a folktale. This may also be reflected to some extent in the folktale's spatial dimension, as in the ancient Greek version of the story of a giant carrying the sky on his shoulder at the point when it meets the earth, quite different in mood from the humorous treatment of the same motif in modern numskull tales. Other uses of space in the ancient folktale, such as distance, discrete borders, and liminality, do not fall short of those found in the majority of literary genres, as well as in visual arts and modern oral tradition, due to their strict relationship with such commonplaces as transition, transformation, quest, and transgression. In these respects and many others, the ancient folktales represent that which is universal and common to the human experience of space, place, and the life within it.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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# Socialization

### *Fairy Tales as Vehicles of Moral Messages*

DOMINIC INGEMARK AND CAMILLA ASPLUND INGEMARK

#### FAIRY TALES AS SOCIALIZATION: THE CASE OF CUPID AND PSYCHE

*Once upon a time in a certain city there was a king and queen. They had three daughters of striking beauty.*<sup>1</sup>

—Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 4.28

Thus begins the ancient fairy tale known as “Cupid and Psyche” (ATU 425B; Figure 7.1), told by the second-century CE author Apuleius. The scene takes place in the rugged wilderness of Thessaly in northern Greece: an old woman tells the story to comfort a deeply distressed young woman held captive in a cave by a band of bandits. On the very day of her wedding, in the process of marrying her childhood love, these bandits had broken into her home, abducting her to extort a ransom from her wealthy family. While she is overcome with grief and bewailing her unlucky fate, the bandits first try to reassure her that all they strive for is the ransom. But, failing to give her any comfort, they tell an old woman working for them to “console her as much as she could with soothing words” (Apul., *Met.* 4.23–4). After several failed attempts, the old woman grew angry; not surprisingly, the young girl cried harder. Only when the old lady starts telling a fairy tale, beginning with the words quoted above, does the girl calm down.



FIGURE 7.1: François Gérard, *Cupid and Psyche*, 1798. Public domain.

The old woman did not tell this tale only to divert the young woman from her distressful situation. The story also carried a clear moral message, underscoring the importance of marriage and trust between spouses. Fairy tales and other folktales, indeed storytelling in general, have multiple functions: while functioning as instruments of socialization, they could also comfort, amuse, and make tedious tasks and travel easier, among other things.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, when studying fairy tales, as well as other types of folklore derived from oral tradition, as instruments of socialization, we must take into consideration both the storytelling context and the contents of the story. For these reasons, the majority of examples we discuss date to Roman times, since the Greek sources provide less information in these areas.

In this specific context, the young woman Charite was about to marry her cousin and childhood love: “He was mutually pledged to me in the fondness of pure love, long since assigned and solemnly pledged in a marriage contract to wed, even formally proclaimed as husband in documents with the consent of the parents” (Apul., *Met.* 4.26). However, many marriages among the elite were arranged (Noy 1990: 393), and like Psyche in the tale, these girls did not know their husbands beforehand. Although Charite’s story takes place in Greece, the tale nevertheless clearly reflects real Roman social practices and legal regulations concerning marriage (Osgood 2006). The whole fairy tale is overheard by the novel’s main character, Lucius, a man turned into an ass by magic, who “deplored not having writing-tablets and stylus to note down such a pretty tale” (Apul., *Met.* 6.25). This meta-comment strongly suggests that Apuleius himself collected oral traditions and wrote them down.

Storytelling as socialization has often been considered as aimed at children (Harries 2015; Zipes 1991), but while Charite would count as a child in modern terms, from the Roman point of view she was regarded as an adult, as girls belonging to the Roman elite typically married in their early teens (*Digesta* 23.2.4; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 54.16.7; Shaw 1987). Indeed, all available evidence suggests that men and women of all ages both told and listened to stories (Hansen 2002: 7), and that the stories retained a socializing element regardless of the audience’s age. The notion that they were primarily aimed at children derives from ancient authors’ disparaging descriptions of storytelling, such as as *muthos graos* in Greek and *anilis fabula* in Latin, in other words “old wives’ tale” or “nurses’ tale,” suggesting that young children comprised the intended audience (Anderson 2006: 56; Graverini 2006: 89–90; Heath 2011: 84; Massaro 1977: 113; Scobie 1979: 242–3).

These phrases, however, were used to describe not only legends and fairy tales but also the works of writers for whom these ancient authors had little or no respect. On the other hand, the aforesaid notion stems from the fact that the influential early modern and modern reworked versions of tales that

drew from literary and oral tale traditions as exemplified by the collections of Charles Perrault (1690s) and the Brothers Grimm (nineteenth century) came to be associated by the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with children and their socialization (Zipes 1991: 14, 45, 48 and *passim*; Hansen 2002: 7), as the title of the Grimms' work, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* ("Children's and Household Tales"), indeed suggests.

The ancient equivalents of *Kunstmärchen* are myths and other stories reworked and incorporated into literary works. In discussing how authors could use oral tales to communicate values and norms, Dio Chrysostom (second century CE) argues along similar lines. He claims that these myths should be embellished "by grafting cultivated and fruit-bearing scions on wild and barren stocks"; that is, they ought to be embellished in terms of literary style and express a clearer moral message (Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 5.1–3). Dio, however, states that these myths were not aimed at children, but at women and the uneducated classes: such myths have "not been made up for a child's sake to make [them] less rash and undisciplined, but for those who possess greater and more complete thoughtlessness" (5.16). Hence, storytelling was not restricted to the nursery, neither in this period nor at the time the Brothers Grimm collected their tales (Hansen 2002: 7). Rather, the use of storytelling as part of socialization started in early childhood and, in all probability, continued throughout life, because fantastic stories like fairy tales as well as realistic stories such as novellas constitute convenient vehicles to convey moral messages.

Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche again proves itself a case in point, for this fairy tale also revolves around another central issue in Greco-Roman culture: envy. Envy was a much-feared emotion, one associated with grave dangers for its object (Dunbabin and Dickie 1983: 9–10). In this case, Psyche's outstanding beauty makes people neglect the worship of the goddess Venus, who determines to bring about Psyche's ruin by preventing her from marrying and starting a family. Later in the story, when Psyche actually has married a man of great powers and wealth—but whom she has never seen—namely the goddess's own son, Cupid, her new station in life also provokes the anger and envy of her less beautiful and less content sisters (Apul., *Met.* 4.32, 5.9). They snare her with lies, claiming that her beloved husband is actually a gigantic serpent intent on fattening her up to eat her, and trick her into killing him (on which, see Felton 2013). Upon finally seeing her hitherto unknown spouse, she realizes that he is Cupid and stops short of completing her hideous task, but nevertheless accidentally hurts him by spilling a drop of burning oil on his shoulder. Having previously warned her never to try to see his face, he hastily flies away, ending their otherwise happy marriage—despite the fact that she carries his child.

While Psyche retaliates against her sisters' evil deeds by turning their envy and greed against them, luring them into ending their own lives, she cannot

escape her own fate. For soon thereafter, Venus finds out that her son has disobeyed her: rather than making Psyche's life miserable as the goddess initially requested, he has married her himself. Filled with anger and resentment, and craving revenge, Venus punishes her daughter-in-law, assigning to Psyche a series of impossible tasks. But with the help of a number of benevolent beings, the story ends well, the couple is reunited, Psyche becomes immortal, and she finally gives birth to the child. The moral message of this story, told by a luckless old woman, is twofold. On the one hand, wealth and beauty can elicit the envy of others, and Charite should accept her fate and let her family pay the ransom to the impoverished bandits. On the other hand, the fairy tale stresses the importance of a harmonious marriage, with mutual respect and trust (see Bradley 2000: 286–7; Wohl 1997: 170–1). Ultimately, Charite is rescued and reunited with her parents and fiancé.

In sum, only when the old woman tries to convey her moral message via a fairy tale does she succeed where her angry words had failed. The Roman author Aulus Gellius (second century CE) demonstrates that the Romans were aware of such an effect:

Aesop, the fabulist from Phrygia, is considered wise—and not without merit—as he taught and proposed what was useful to remind [people of] and advise [them on], not severely and imperiously as is the custom of philosophers but by producing witty and delightful fables, he directed people's minds and hearts to ideas that were wholesome and provident while imbuing them with a kind of charm in listening to them.

(*Noctes Atticae* 2.29.1–2)

## STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF CONVEYING A SENSITIVE MESSAGE

The telling of fairy tales, novellas, fables, and other types of orally transmitted lore functioned as efficient means of conveying a message, often in situations that seem to have been too sensitive to discuss in direct terms, such as extremely personal situations linked to loss and death, or situations sensitive from a social or political perspective. For example, when it comes to the personal, ancient literature provides an abundance of stories dealing with child-killing demons (Asplund Ingemark and Ingemark 2013; Johnston 1999). In a world where child mortality was frighteningly high (Krause 2011: 624), virtually everybody would have been affected by this: women who themselves had lost babies, young women who feared they might lose children in the future, and all their relatives. While we can surmise that young mothers received advice from other women about how to take care of children, talking about the threat of death may well have proven too harrowing for the listener.

Turning to politically and socially sensitive messages, we have the story of “The Country Mouse and the City Mouse” (ATU 112), a well-known version of which appears in the work of the Roman poet Horace (first century BCE). In *Satire* 2.6, Horace portrays the political and social life of Rome as full of envy and stress, whereas he idealizes country life—a recurrent *topos* in Roman literature.<sup>3</sup> In the poem, the story is told by Horace’s rustic neighbor, Cervius—a man of lower social standing—who cannot directly criticize the lives of the rich and influential, or indeed life in Rome itself. Telling this cautionary tale, he can nevertheless convey a clear message. If Cervius had expressed his views more directly, they could have posed a danger to him socially and politically. By presenting these norms and values in story form, he could express his opinions without offense. This provides further evidence that storytelling as a means of socialization by no means was limited to women and children, although Horace does refer to stories as being “old wives’ tales” (*anilis fabellas*). Here, the fable is told by a man to other men:

Every now and then our neighbor Cervius chatters away with old wives’ tales according to the event at hand. So if someone praises the riches of Arellius, ignorant of the anxiety [they bring], he begins thus: “Once upon a time, so they say, a country mouse received a city mouse in his poor hole, both host and guest being old friends.”

(2.6.77–81)

The country mouse lives a frugal life, but is a gracious host who gives his guest the daintiest morsels of the meal. The city mouse, who can hardly make himself eat the lowly fare offered, persuades the country mouse to accompany him to the city where they will eat much tastier food. At night they sneak into a mansion where the remains of a magnificent dinner are stored in baskets, and both enjoy themselves mightily until their dinner is disrupted by the thunderous barking of huge Molossian hounds. The startled country mouse proclaims that such a life doesn’t suit him, and returns to his lowly dwelling and homely diet of simple vetch.

William Hansen has argued that ancient fables were meant to be understood both literally and metaphorically. The principle function was either to express “an unwelcome message,” as we have seen above, or to emphasize or clarify (Hansen 2017: 31). While we know many ancient fables in their entirety, clearly it was often sufficient to just mention the traditional name of the fable to make this point (Holzberg 2002: 2). The comic playwright Aristophanes (fifth century BCE), for instance, refers to an unspecified fable about a cat and a mouse: “once upon a time, there was a mouse and a cat” (*Wasps* 1182).

When Socrates introduces the telling of a fable in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon (c. 430–c. 354 BCE), he refers to its traditional name, “the tale

[*logon*] of the dog.” In this storytelling context, Socrates gives his friend Aristarchus follow-up advice on a delicate matter. In the aftermath of civil unrest in Athens, Aristarchus’s female relatives had moved in with him, and he feared they would all starve to death as they were now fourteen people in the household (not counting slaves), and his land and property had been seized by enemies or were otherwise useless. Socrates had suggested he put his relatives to work, which Aristarchus did, buying wool for them to fashion into clothing. This plan succeeded, and Aristarchus returned to tell Socrates the good news, adding that the women’s only complaint was that he was the only idle person in the household:

“Then why don’t you tell them the tale of the dog?” said Socrates. “For they say that when the animals could talk, a sheep said to her master: ‘It’s astonishing that you give us sheep nothing but what we get from the land, even though we furnish you with wool and lambs and cheese, and you give a share of the food you have to your dog, who provides you with none of these things.’ Hearing this, the dog said: ‘Yes, by Zeus. For am I not the one who keeps you safe, so that you are not stolen by men or snatched away by wolves? If I did not guard you, you could not even graze for fear of being killed.’ Now in this manner, they say, the sheep conceded to the dog being held in preference. So you should also tell these women that you are like a watchdog and superintendent to them, and that it is because of you they can work and live in security and innocence, without being wronged by anyone.”  
(Xen., *Mem.* 2.7.13–14)

Socrates’ tale emphasizes Aristarchus’s supervisory role and reinforces the traditional gender hierarchy of the household. We do not know how the women reacted to this tale, but since the message could have been controversial if delivered directly, the fable provided an indirect means of transmitting the moral.

A similar example appears in Livy’s history of Rome, *Ab urbe condita* (first century BCE), and relates to the conflicts between patricians and plebeians in the early Roman Republic. In 494 BCE, the patricians sent Menenius Agrippa to negotiate with the plebeians, who had withdrawn from society and set up camp on a nearby hill. Using the body as a metaphor, Agrippa argued that the Roman people, represented as different parts of the body, constituted a whole and must be reunited:

In those days when everything in man did not form a harmonious whole as it does now, but each member had its own intentions and its own voice, the other parts resented that it was through their industry, labor and service that the belly acquired everything, while the belly remained silent in their midst



doing nothing but enjoying the delights offered. Then they conspired so that the hands would not bring food to the mouth, nor the mouth receive what was given, nor the teeth grind what they received. While they in their wrath wanted to subdue the belly, each and every member as well as the whole body were wasting away completely. Then it was apparent that the belly also had a far from sluggish task to perform, and that it was no more sustained than it sustained [others], giving out to all parts of the body that through which we live and flourish, when it has been divided equally between the veins and is ripe with digested food, namely the blood.

(Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 2.32.9–11)

By employing this metaphor as a fable, argues Livy, Agrippa persuaded the plebeians to return to Rome and resume their life as part of Roman society, recognizing that patricians and plebeians were equally important parts of the social system. While this did mean acquiescing to again being ruled by the “belly,” namely, the patricians, the conflict also resulted in the introduction of controls on the patricians’ power. In short, storytelling strengthened Agrippa’s argument (Hansen 2017: 396; Holzberg 2002: 31–2).<sup>4</sup>

## THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF STORYTELLING

As mentioned above, the function of these stories was not only socialization. Rather, the fact that they also had other functions was what made them especially effective (cf. Ashliman 2004: 1). In his work on folktales in the ancient world, *Ariadne’s Thread* (2002), Hansen argues: “Traditional stories—folktales, legends, and myths—are works of verbal art that human beings deploy in different social and literary situations for a variety of purposes such as entertainment, sensation, instruction, persuasion, consolation, justification, clarification, edification and the exploration of feelings and beliefs” (2002: xi). We have chosen to designate this aspect of storytelling *multifunctionality*. For while norms and values often form the basis for the stories, some could evoke a strong sense of shame, while others are truly hair-raising, awe-inspiring, or amusing. Indeed, they could be horrifying and humoristic at the same time.

Thelyphron’s story from Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* exemplifies this multifunctionality. While we typically tell such stories in the third person, this is told in the first person by Thelyphron himself at a dinner party. In discussing witches and their horrific deeds, which include mutilating dead bodies, Thelyphron is asked to narrate his own misfortunes. Having volunteered to guard the corpse of a young man against the attacks of witches who were shape-shifters and could take the form of weasels, he had fallen asleep on his watch, and though the corpse was left untouched, his own face “was completely mutilated and disfigured” by the witches (Apul., *Met.* 2.20; see also Ogden 2002: 136–40). The other guests’ reactions were neither dread nor disgust, but

rather unrestrained laughter in the face of the foolish victim. The moral of this story is double faceted: firstly, it deals with Thelyphron's own overestimation of his abilities—his lack of humility in the face of danger—and secondly, it deals with the fundamental importance of proper funerary rituals, including reverent treatment of the human body.

Correspondingly, in the Roman author Petronius's *Satyrica* (first century CE), the freedman Niceros tells a hair-raising story of how he once encountered a werewolf. Urged on by Trimalchio, the host of the party, Niceros begins his story as follows: "While I was still a slave, we were living in a narrow street; the house is now Gavilla's. There it was the will of the gods that I fell in love with the wife of Terentius the inn-keeper; you are acquainted with Melissa of Tarentum, a very beautiful woman" (Petronius, *Satyrica* 61). At the unexpected death of Melissa's husband, Niceros hastens to her country villa, accompanied by a Roman soldier. They leave the city at cockcrow, before the sun has risen, with the moon still shining brightly. Stopping at a cemetery, the soldier steps aside to relieve himself—or so Niceros assumes. To his shock, the soldier undresses, leaving his clothes in a heap on the ground. After he urinates in a circle around them, the clothes turn into stone and the soldier abruptly transforms into a wolf. Scared senseless, Niceros runs for his life until he reaches Melissa's house, where he hears that a wolf attacked a farm's livestock before it was wounded by a slave and ran off. When Niceros returns home, he finds the soldier wounded and realizes that he is a werewolf, a shape-shifter (*versipellis*). This tale is both horrific and humorous, but still carries a message. Governed by lust, Niceros has risked not only his own life but has also put Melissa and her household in peril. Though the story does not explicitly state that the werewolf attacks humans, Niceros's dread would be out of place, even ridiculous, if he had nothing to fear from it, and the story would lose much of its point.

Moreover, committing adultery was normally a criminal act (Rawson 1986: 32–3), but whether Melissa would have been exempt is unclear. The law about adultery at that time excluded women who worked in public houses, or who were actresses or prostitutes.<sup>5</sup> By definition they could not commit adultery (Cohen 1991: 109). Regardless of her legal status, public exposure of Melissa and Niceros's extramarital relation would have brought about both shame and loss of status for her spouse, Terentius. Indeed, many topics that at first seem to be very serious were treated humorously. In Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, Lucius relates a story of this kind, beginning with the words: "We obtained lodgings at the nearest inn, and there we heard an amusing story about the cuckolding of a certain poor workman, which I want you to hear too" (9.4). In this story, the unfaithful wife hides her young lover from her husband in a large jar. Under the pretense that she sold the jar—and at a good price—she fools her unsuspecting husband into believing that the young man is the buyer. The wife is likened to a prostitute, *meretrix* (9.7), aligning with Roman law,

which stated that women who “prostituted themselves,” namely, committed adultery even without receiving money, must be regarded as prostitutes (*Digesta* 23.2.43.3).

In these cases, conveying values and norms important in Roman society was not actually the main focus. Rather, telling and listening to stories was considered a pleasant pastime, something to be expected at dinner parties, as we have seen above in both Apuleius’s and Petronius’s novels (Horsfall 1989: 195). Perhaps the fact that they were not told primarily for the moral message was what made them so effective. Often people simply wanted to be amused, but simultaneously had their morals reinforced. The same was the case with stories told to make tedious tasks an easier burden (Graverini 2007: 145–6), as in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Only the daughters of Minyas are indoors, disturbing the festival with their unseasonable spinning, either spinning the wool or turning the threads with their thumb, or remaining close to the loom and besetting their maids with work. One of them, while drawing out the thread with a nimble thumb, says: “While other women are idle and assemble in throngs to these invented religious rites, let us—who favour Pallas, a far better goddess—lighten the useful work of our hands with talk, and let’s take turns to tell something to our idle ears, lest time seem long.”

(4.32–54)

As we saw in the story of the poor workman, stories were also told at inns and during travel, as in another passage from Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*:

I [Lucius] was travelling to Thessaly on business ... I made myself a third to two companions who happened to be going a little before me. And while I was listening to what they were talking about, one of them let out a laugh and said: “Stop telling such incongruous and monstrous lies.” When I heard this—always being thirsty for novelty—I said: “No indeed, share your talk with me; not that I’m a curious person, but I’m one who wants to learn everything, or at least many things. At the same time, the pleasant delight of stories will smooth out the unevenness of the ridge we are climbing.”

(1.2)

Lucius then hears Aristomenes tell the gruesome tale of the awful fate of his old friend Socrates, who was brutally butchered by his former lover, a witch called Meroe, and how Aristomenes in vain had tried to save his friend, but failed. While the story revolves around the two main characters, it provides broader commentary on family values, and clearly the author, Apuleius, strongly believed in these (Bradley 2000; *contra* Lateiner 2000: 313–16). Lucius’s reaction to this gory and violent story follows:

But I do believe him [i.e., Aristomenes], by Hercules, and offer my deserved thanks for diverting us with the good fellowship provided by a pleasant story; in short making me escape the labor and boredom of the rough long road. I think my carrier is happy for that favor too: I've been brought all the way to the gates of this city, not on his back, but on my ears.

(1.20)

## AGE, GENDER, CLASS

Studies of living oral traditions today provide us with interesting insights into how storytelling may have worked in antiquity. Evidence suggests that storytelling was central in the social interaction between people: men and women, children as well as adults. It seems men and women had specialized audiences; men generally told stories to other men, women to mixed groups and children (Hansen 2002: 12). The conditions for storytelling could differ between the sexes: women's often quiet work allowed for the telling of tales, whereas men's work could be noisier and less conducive to storytelling.

Using oral traditions in North Carolina as an analogy, Philip Stadter has pointed out that men told stories to children during work breaks (1997: 20). Whether this was the case in ancient Rome we do not know, since ancient sources dealing with telling stories to children depict women, not men, as the tellers. This, of course, relates to the notion of *aniles fabulae*, old wives' tales. The amount of literary evidence concerning women, particularly nurses, involved in storytelling likely reflects the reality within the elite classes. The male authors, predominantly from the upper echelons of society, were typically reared by nurses in their infancy and early childhood. As many of the male elite were outspokenly negative toward storytelling, nothing suggests that they would ever have heard such stories from their own fathers. Although we have no proof that men from lower social classes told their sons stories, the modern analogy suggests that this may well have been the case.

While the evidence concerning stories told to children is relatively scant, what survives suggests that certain types of story were told to children. Most importantly, as mentioned above, there were stories about fear-inspiring female demons—Lamia, Mormo, Mormolyke, Akko, and Alphito—designed to make children behave and obey.<sup>6</sup> If we use later storytelling contexts as an analogy, one might assume that these stories served to discourage children from doing things that were harmful or even lethal (Stattin 2008).

Aside from their intended effect on children, these female demons also embodied everything that a Greek or Roman woman should not be: rather than being caring and loving, they are filled with resentment and driven by envy, having been bereft of their own children. They are transgressors or shape-shifters, occasionally depicted as having both male and female features (*Suda*,

s.v. “Lamia”). Ancient authors often describe them as filthy and revolting. In short, they were the very opposite of the mothers or nurses who would have told the stories. Thus, these stories would have had a socializing function, making cultural norms and values clear both to the children, regarding the roles of women and men, and to women, regarding the roles of childminders.

Much in the same manner as storytelling functioned to discourage children from dangerous behavior, it also functioned to dissuade adults from doing things considered harmful to what constituted the core of Roman society: the family. Accordingly, a significant number of these stories center around matters such as marriage, family, childbirth and childcare, and death and funerals. For example, beyond the obvious need to protect one’s children from any ills or harm, it was equally important to begin one’s family by marrying the right woman. To engage in a long-term relationship with a woman from outside one’s own community or social circles was considered hazardous; not surprisingly, storytelling provided one way of warning naïve young men. Many ancient authors tell stories, originally passed down orally, dealing with such women. The story of Aristomenes and Socrates’ encounter with the witch Meroe and her sister Panthia even has a close counterpart in an orally transmitted story from Messenia in *modern* Greece (Lawson [1910] 1964: 182–3).

Apuleius’s story tells how Socrates abandoned his wife and children and formed a relationship with Meroe, a woman not only of ill repute but also barren due to her age. With the help of Aristomenes, Socrates tries to escape this destructive union. But his fate is sealed and, as mentioned above, Meroe and Panthia end his life by cutting his throat and tearing out his heart (Figure 7.2). Replacing his heart with a sponge, the witches create what can best be described as a revenant, a walking corpse. Socrates is kept alive by the sponge, which has a magic spell on it, but he dies permanently as the sponge comes into contact with water and falls out when he drinks from a brook.

The Messenian story, collected in the nineteenth century, strongly resembles that of Apuleius, though with a happier ending. The creatures here are called “Striges,” a word of Latin origin meaning “witches”:

Once upon a time a man was passing the night at the house of a friend whose household consisted of his wife and mother-in-law. About midnight some noise awakened him, and listening intently he made out the voices of the two women conversing together. What he heard terrified him, for they were planning to eat himself or his host, whichever proved the fatter. At once he perceived that his friend’s wife and mother-in-law were Striges, and knowing that there was no means of escaping the danger that was threatening him, he determined to try to save himself by guile.

The Striges advanced towards the sleeping men and took hold of their guest’s foot to see if it was heavy, and consequently fat and good for eating; he however, understanding their purpose, raised his foot of his own accord





FIGURE 7.2: Meroe and Panthia mutilate Socrates while Aristomenes lies under the door blasted open by the witches. Engraving by Jean-François Bastien, 1787. Public domain.

as they took it in their hands and weighed it, so that it felt to them as light as a feather, and they let it drop again disappointed. Then they took hold of the foot of the man who was sleeping, and naturally found it very heavy. Delighted at the result of their investigation, they ripped open the wretched man's breast, pulled out his liver and other parts, and threw them among the hot ashes on the hearth to cook. Then noticing that they had no wine, they flew to the wine-shop, took what they wanted and returned.

But in the interval the guest got up, collected the flesh that was being cooked, stowed it away in his pouch, and put in its place on the hearth some animal's dung. The Striges however ate up greedily what was on the hearth, complaining only that it was somewhat over-done. The next day the two friends rose and left the house; the victim of the previous night was very pale, but he did not bear the slightest wound or scar on his breast. He remarked to his companion that he was feeling excessively hungry, and the other gave him what had been cooked during the night, which he ate and found exceedingly invigorating; the blood mounted to his cheeks and he was perfectly sound again. Thereupon his friend told him what had happened during the night, and they went together and slew the Striges.

(Lawson 1964 [1910]: 182–3)

These two stories, one modern and one ancient Roman, strongly resemble each other not only in structure but in their messages. Forming a relationship with a woman you do not know and cannot trust can prove dangerous, even lethal. Moreover, the man in the modern version noticeably lives with his wife and mother-in-law, both of whom were witches, and no children are mentioned. In Apuleius's story, it is a witch and her sister, another relationship with no children. The primary purpose of marriage was procreation (Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 4.3.2; Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 52.3; Dixon 1992: 62, 67–8; Gardner 1999: 143; Treggiari 1991: 8; 1994: 311), and the Romans saw little point in marriage when procreation was no longer possible (Cokayne 2003: 123; Harlow 2007: 197). In antiquity, marriages were typically not the concern of the two individuals, but rather required the consent of the respective families, and were often prearranged (*Digesta* 23.2.2; Bradley 2000: 286–7; Dixon 1992: 47–50; Noy 1990: 393–5).

In Apuleius's tale, the context was to make travel less tedious. More importantly, it involved one man speaking to another. While the story as well as the setting are, of course, fictitious, the existence of such a story suggests that adult men did occasionally tell stories to other men as part of social interaction, as Horace's fable of the country mouse also makes clear.

Also illustrating the import of marriage and tensions within the family is the story that, though not classified as its own tale type, is usually labeled "Potiphar's Wife" after the best-known variant, part of the biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 39:6–20). It is a tale of great antiquity: the oldest example, the Egyptian "Tale



of Two Brothers,” is indeed one of the oldest surviving folktales we have, dating to the thirteenth century BCE.<sup>7</sup> The basic plot is simple and easily adapted to varying circumstances. An older woman propositions a younger man who turns down her advances. Fearing exposure, she accuses the young man of making unwelcome advances or of raping her, and her enraged husband punishes the innocent youth without investigating the veracity of his wife’s account (Hansen 2002: 332). A common feature in most variants is the incestuous aspect of the proposed relationship, as Shalom Goldman has observed; the young man is part of the family or household, and a sexual relationship would “constitute a betrayal of both human trust and divine law” (1995: 34). Often the young man is a stepson, sometimes a brother-in-law, a guestfriend, or, as in the biblical Joseph’s case, a trusted slave:

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he refused. “With me in charge,” he told her, “my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, “Come to bed with me!” But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. “Look,” she said to them, “this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.”

She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: “That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house.” When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, “This is how your slave treated me,” he burned with anger. Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.

(Hansen 2002: 332–52)

Among other things, Potiphar’s wife cunningly plays on ethnic prejudice, reproaching her husband for introducing a Hebrew slave into the household. Joseph receives an unusually light punishment, being merely cast into prison rather than executed (Hansen 2002: 335). During his imprisonment Joseph gains a reputation as a skilled dream-interpreter, a skill that eventually makes

him second in rank only to the Pharaoh, thus rising far above the station of his former master. The Pharaoh also gives Joseph a virtuous and beautiful wife, a kind of poetic justice for rejecting the illicit liaison with Potiphar's wife. Accordingly, the story could be employed to instruct the audience on the rewards of virtue (Goldman 1995: 35–6).

The tale was highly popular and thus widely disseminated in ancient Mediterranean cultures. In classical sources, it has been adapted to some twenty different sets of characters (Hansen 2002: 332), though the most familiar version from the Greco-Roman world is that of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Phaedra, married to the Greek hero Theseus, fell in love with her stepson Hippolytus, but he fled her embraces. She began to fear that he would accuse her to his father, so, breaking the doors to her bedroom and tearing her clothes, she claimed Hippolytus had assaulted her. As Theseus believed her without ever checking the veracity of her account, he asked the god Poseidon to destroy his son. Thus, when Hippolytus was driving his chariot by the sea, a bull sent by the god emerged from the waves, frightening his horses. Hippolytus became entangled in the reins and was dragged to his death. Meanwhile, Phaedra hanged herself when her passion became known (Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.18–19).

Euripides' tragic drama *Hippolytus* (428 BCE) provides a highly influential variant on the tale. Hippolytus, notorious for hating all women, comes across as proud and intolerant, and Phaedra as more noble as she plans to die rather than succumb to her passion. However, her nurse spoils this plan by revealing Phaedra's secret to Hippolytus, who is horrified and reproaches Phaedra personally. Phaedra hangs herself, leaving behind a letter accusing Hippolytus of rape. A distinguishing feature of Euripides' play is the theme of immoderation in love: Phaedra is obsessively passionate and comes from a family of women possessing this trait, while Hippolytus—as a devotee of the virgin goddess Artemis—is averse to sexual relationships with any woman (Hansen 2002: 337–8). Indeed, Euripides' play opens with the revelation of the true cause of their misfortune: Hippolytus angered the goddess Aphrodite by calling her “the worst of the deities,” and she retaliated by making Phaedra fall in love with him, intending this to lead to disaster (Eur., *Hipp.* 13–28). Thus, the two characters represent two extremes: Phaedra's excessive passion and Hippolytus's total lack thereof were both reprehensible in the eyes of the ancient audience, and the play's version of the tale serves as a warning to avoid such extremes (Hansen 2002: 337–8).<sup>8</sup>

Underlying most variants of the story, and irrespective of the cast of characters, is the notion of men being better able to control their desires, whereas women more easily give in to theirs. Women's passion was also considered more violent and powerful than men's, making it harder to control. This conforms to a more general notion of women being less able to control their emotions and displaying stronger emotions than men, whether love, hate, or anger (Hansen 2002: 349–50).

Sexual mores and marriage seem to have been common themes in male storytelling, as in the story of Aristomenes. In another instance of predominantly male-to-male storytelling, the well-known tale of the Widow of Ephesus (ATU 1510) from Petronius's *Satyrica* (110–13) is told among friends traveling by ship, including the ship's sailors and one woman. The story goes as follows: there was a young and beautiful widow—renowned for her chastity and loyalty to her late husband—who mourned so intensely that she refused to leave his tomb, and would neither drink nor eat. Outside the tomb, a soldier was guarding the bodies of some crucified criminals to prevent their relatives from providing proper burials, the denial of burial being part of the punishment; the Greeks and Romans believed that the dead would not rest unless provided with a proper grave and the correct funerary rites.<sup>9</sup> The soldier, hearing the widow's laments, tried to comfort her but soon also seduced her, and their sexual relationship is likened to a wedding (*nuptias fecerunt*). Roman law expected the widow to go into mourning and not remarry for a period of ten months, to prevent any doubt about the paternity of children should she have been pregnant at the time of her husband's demise (*Digesta* 3.2.11.2; Rawson 1986: 31). If she remarried before the ten months were up, she incurred *infamia* (*Digesta* 3.2.11), a technical term with both formal and informal meanings: legally, a loss of the legal protection normally afforded to Roman citizens, and morally, a damage to one's reputation due to immoral behavior.

Neglecting his duties and instead enjoying sex with the young woman had dire consequences for the soldier. In the dead of night, relatives retrieved one of the crucified criminals from the cross and buried him properly. Instead of facing severe punishment, the soldier decided to commit suicide. Rather than lose another man, the widow callously commanded him to hang her late husband on the cross, where the people of the town, much to their amazement, found him the next day and, recognizing him as the widow's late husband, wondered how he had ended up on the cross. Yet there is no mention of a punishment for the couple. The audience's emotional reaction to the story was not one and the same: "The sailors received the tale with laughter, Tryphaena blushed in no moderate degree and laid her face lovingly on Giton's neck. Nor did Lichas laugh, but shook his head angrily and said: 'If the governor had been a just man, he should have returned the husband's corpse to its tomb and nailed the woman to the cross'" (Petron., *Sat.* 113). These reactions allow us to observe the multifunctionality of storytelling. While the story revolves around two central issues—the importance of fidelity and the institution of marriage, and the importance of appropriate burial—it was clearly considered to be amusing, if not by all. Lichas's own experience of being cuckolded did not make him receptive to the ambiguity of such stories, which inculcate traditional morals despite ostensibly celebrating people who get away with immoral behavior. The widow and her lover are scarcely proffered as models worth emulating,

as Tryphaena's blush demonstrates. Telling a story where the pair receives their just deserts, however, might also have contravened the storytelling purpose—to lighten the mood after quarrels among the passengers.

Finally, let us turn to questions of class and social belonging. While many authors, including Apuleius and Petronius, depict storytelling as being largely a pursuit of the non-elite, and despite the derogatory views on storytelling held by many of the elite, they themselves clearly participated in storytelling at dinner parties and via other venues. For example, in a letter to his friend Sura, Pliny the Younger (c. 61–c. 113 CE) records two ghost stories he himself has heard, and asks Sura whether he believes in ghosts. One of these stories concerns a haunted house in Athens (*Epistulae* 7.27.5–11; see Felton 1999: 62, 65–73). In another letter, Pliny tells an amazing story about a dolphin, saying he heard it at a dinner party (*Epistulae* 9.33; see also Hansen 2017: 186–9, Stevens 2009): in Hippo, in North Africa, a dolphin befriended a local boy, and the two used to swim in a lagoon together with other children. Many people congregated to witness this prodigy. Eventually, the whole town was so overrun by visitors disturbing the peace that the decision was made to kill the dolphin to restore life to normal. We do not know enough about the original storytelling context to ascertain whether Pliny and his sources narrated these tales with the purpose of transmitting a moral point; nevertheless, the stories clearly transmitted cultural norms and values held in ancient Rome. The story of the dolphin centers on the importance of friendship in Roman society, as Pliny emphasizes the boy and dolphin's mutual affection (cf. Cicero, *De amicitia* 4; Konstan 1997). The story about the haunted house, on the other hand, focuses on the importance of traditional funerary rituals and burial (cf. Felton 1999: 9–12; Hope 2000: 105).

## MANAGING THE EMOTIONS

Turning from the death of adults to the death of young children and, in some cases, their mothers, we see a subject that was obviously very difficult to discuss. As mentioned above, storytelling constituted a way to approach these highly sensitive subjects. Also, both hearing and telling these stories demonstrably had therapeutic properties (Asplund Ingemark and Ingemark 2013). Some ancient authors who mention child-killing demons describe them as bogeys used to frighten children into submission, but other sources indicate that they were much more than this. These figures belonged to both folk belief and mythology, but since they were not included in any sanctioned religious cult, the evidence we have on beliefs regarding them is scattered and often dismissive (cf. Johnston 1994: 99–100; 1995).

Earlier research has suggested that these demons functioned as scapegoats when sudden deaths occurred in the family (Johnston 1999: ix). Blaming a

supernatural creature averted the socially disruptive consequences of imputing blame to family members, or of accusing neighbors of witchcraft (194–5). In Rome, some 50 percent of all children born died before the age of five (Frier 1982: 230, 249; Krause 2011: 624; Parkin 1992: 92); the maternal death rate may have been almost 20 percent in Greece (Blundell 1998), and 25 mothers per 1,000 births in Rome (Jackson 1988: 106). Consequently, explanations for such deaths were in high demand, and we agree that these demons must have functioned at least in large part as scapegoats. But such stories also served as a kind of therapy (Asplund Ingemark and Ingemark 2013).

Two emotions were intimately associated with child-killing demons: fear and envy. The fear went beyond simple grief at losing dear ones; it also encompassed dread that the family and family name would not survive (cf. Harlow and Laurence 2002: 40). Children were also expected to care for their aged parents, so such demons also reflected the fear of being left alone in one's old age (Dixon 1992: 25; Hanson 1999: 25; Harlow and Laurence 2002: 119). The motivating force for the demons' evil deeds was envy (Greek *phthonos*, Latin *invidia*): envy of either having children at all, or having children still alive. Lamia, for example, was once a mother, but lost her children before they came of age. The fullest extant variant of her story appears in Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE):

At the base of this rock was a large cave, thickly covered with ivy and bryony, in which they recount that Queen Lamia—a beauty they say—had been born. Yet because of the cruelty of her soul they say that the time thereafter has transfigured her appearance to a beast-like one. As all the children born to her had died, she was heavy at heart due to her suffering and envied other women their blessing of children, and commanded that the newborn babies be torn out of their arms and immediately killed. On this account, also among us up to the present lifetime, the legend of this woman perseveres among the children, and her name is most fearful to them.

(*Bibliotheca historica* 20.41.3–5)

As creatures residing outside the household, and even outside the human community, these demons ideally shouldered the burden of envy, an emotion viewed as particularly destructive in Greco-Roman culture (Dunbabin and Dickie 1983: 10). Storytelling allowed people to manage their emotions, and the process of scapegoating provided people with an explanation for the inexplicable—the sudden death of previously healthy children and young women. These stories also had a socializing function, stressing the importance of never being negligent when it came to childcare. This example, about an ape trying to imitate humans, provides a cautionary tale:

The ape is the most malicious of animals, and even more so in its attempts to mimic man. For example, [an ape] happened to see a nurse washing a

little child in a tub—itself remaining unobserved—and first she took off the swaddling-clothes, and then cooped the child up after the bath. Then the ape watched narrowly as the nurse put the child to rest, and seeing that the place was abandoned, it leapt through an open window from which it had seen everything at a glance. The ape lifted the child up from the bed and stripped it naked as it had chanced to see done; as water was being heated on the hot embers, [the ape] poured it over the unlucky child, and of course killed it pitifully.

(Aelian, *De natura animalium* 7.21)

While we lack this story's context, it does not seem unreasonable that such narratives functioned to make young mothers, nurses, and other child-minders aware of the dire consequences of leaving newborn babies unsupervised.

## CONCLUSION

Storytelling formed a significant part of everyday life in antiquity, filling a number of different functions, including serving as an effective means of inculcating commonly held norms and values. That is, it filled a socializing function. A typical storytelling feature is variation, and the storyteller could adapt a given story to make a point (Hansen 1982: 102). Simultaneously, people told stories for many other reasons: they could be hair-raising and awe-inspiring, or amusing—provoking laughter—or instructional and explanatory, to mention but a few functions. This multifunctionality is one reason why storytelling constituted such a useful means of conveying a moral message. In some cases, the primary purpose of telling a tale was to present this moral point. Perhaps more frequently, however, storytelling was about social interaction. Nevertheless, these stories clearly reflect the norms and values of ancient society, often instilling them in such a subtle manner that people would never tire of the tales told.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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# Power

### *Uses and Abuses of Authority in Ancient Tales*

DEBBIE FELTON

In considering how power manifests in ancient folktales, let us first consider what we mean by “power.” In one respect, power can refer to the ability to do something; many animals and inanimate objects in ancient tales, for example, have the power of speech. In its larger sense, of course, power refers to the ability of one person or group to influence or direct the behavior and lives of others, and perhaps even to influence the course of events of entire cities and countries. This chapter focuses on the latter aspect, examining power relationships in tales from antiquity. What kind of power could people attain and how did they attain it? What did they use power for—to benefit their communities, or to benefit primarily themselves? And to what extent might the representations of power in these tales reflect real-life societal attitudes toward power, including its uses and abuses? Tales from the ancient Eastern and Mediterranean regions reflect various concerns about the appropriate and inappropriate use of power. The Greeks, as they tried to develop a working democracy, told many cautionary tales depicting the negative effects of absolute power. The Romans, too, despite a rather more authoritarian political structure, incorporated tales about the use and abuse of power into various literary genres. In literature down the centuries, abuse of power is repeatedly vilified and often punished in folktales reflecting real-life concerns about oppression and individual freedoms. Only occasionally is power used wisely and wielded with beneficence.



## WHO WIELDED POWER?

On the one hand, in Greek myths as opposed to folktales, the most powerful beings were the gods themselves.<sup>1</sup> Even mortal kings had to bend to the gods' will when the gods chose to interfere in mortal affairs. Female deities often wielded as much power as male deities, as in the case of Demeter, who, when Hades abducted her daughter Persephone, refused to let crops grow—thus threatening life on earth, which in turn threatened to leave the gods with no worshippers—until Zeus worked out a compromise, as told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which provides aetiologies for the change of seasons as well as for the worship of Demeter at Eleusis. Similarly, Aphrodite embarrassed Zeus and stirred up trouble in his marriage with Hera by causing him to fall in love with mortal women on many occasions, often allowing us to view her as a metaphor for the overwhelming power of sexual desire.

Most of the time, however, the goddesses were subordinate to the gods. Zeus eventually punished Aphrodite by causing *her* to fall in love with a mortal, as told in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Hera, powerless to hurt Zeus himself, usually took out her frustration with her husband on his mortal consorts. Even powerful, semi-divine females such as the witches Circe and Medea, who should have triumphed over the men they encountered, still found themselves subordinated to men far less powerful than they—king Odysseus and prince Jason, respectively—and relegated to the role of “helper-maiden” thanks to the wishes of the gods. Hermes helped Odysseus resist Circe's spells, while Aphrodite caused Medea to fall in love with Jason. In both cases the gods in general, and the goddesses Athena and Hera in particular, supported the heroes' quests.<sup>2</sup> In many Greek and Roman stories the action is set in motion by an oracle of the god Apollo, who thus lurks powerfully in the background even if he never appears in person as a main character. Consequently, for example, the king and queen in Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche, despite their royal status, have no choice but to sacrifice their daughter Psyche as Apollo's oracle seemingly demands.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, in most ancient stories that skew more toward folktale types than toward myths (many of which formed the foundation of religious beliefs), the gods usually play a minor role if they appear in the stories at all, and there is no significant equivalent for powerful magical beings of an intermediate status between gods and mortals, in contrast to the jinns and fairies of Eastern and European folktales. Although the Greeks often refer to creatures they called *daimones*, the term was used very generally to cover everything from spirits of the dead to creatures such as *lamiae* (on which, see Chapter 5), and although *daimones* were understood to be entities more than mortal but less than divine, the inconsistencies across their various natures and abilities are reflected in their minimal role in folktale narrative. Moreover, the power of witches in classical

literature was muted or limited, as mentioned above, and the broad spectrum of monsters that appear in ancient tales do not wield magical powers, although some may have extraordinary strength or unusual abilities, such as the capacity to breathe fire. Rather, with the exception of the tale of Cupid and Psyche—in which various deities play significant roles—kings, high-status politicians, and other aristocratic types generally wield the most power in ancient Greek and Roman tales. Such tales often involve a reversal of that power, however, as the kings or other powerful people experience *nemesis* (a downfall) thanks to *hubris*, the latter usually demonstrated in classical literature as attitudes and actions showing arrogance toward the gods, a lack of understanding of mortal limitations, and/or a violation of cultural boundaries.

### ABUSE OF POWER

Classical literature abounds with tales of abuse of power and its often-dire consequences for its victims, its perpetrators, or both. Though closer to legend than folktale, the story of Periander and his wife Melissa provides one of antiquity's most famous examples of a leader abusing his power. The fifth-century BCE Greek writer Herodotus tells this story halfway through his *Histories*, as part of an extended speech against tyranny that serves as “a key narrative hinge, setting the stage for the *Histories*' movement into the Persian wars,” in which democratic Athens will play a decisive role as the savior of Greece against the monarchy of Persia (Buxton 2012: 562–3). Periander, a historical figure (d. c. 586 BCE), ruled the city of Corinth.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of his *Histories*, Herodotus notes a shift in Periander from judicious leader (1.24; 5.92f) to despot (5.92g; see Felton 1998). The story of Periander's treatment of his wife and other women of the city illustrates the height of his despotism.

Herodotus tells us that “in one day, Periander stripped all the women of Corinth naked because of his own wife, Melissa” (5.92g.1).<sup>5</sup> Why? Periander was unable to find something a friend had left at his home for safekeeping. So he sent a messenger to the Oracle of the Dead at Thesprotia to summon the spirit of Melissa and ask *her* where the item was.<sup>6</sup> But when her ghost appeared she refused to answer, saying she was cold and naked in the afterlife; Periander had not burned her clothes with her—a violation of traditional burial custom. As proof that she spoke the truth, she added that Periander “had cast his loaves into a cold oven,” namely, had sex with her corpse (5.92g.2; she neglects to mention that Periander was also the one who killed her in the first place, 3.50). As if his treatment of Melissa's corpse (on two counts) were not bad enough, he decided to appease her spirit by having all the women of Corinth gather in one place so that his guards could strip them of their clothes, which he then collected and burned in dedication to his dead wife. When he consulted the Oracle again Melissa indicated where the missing item lay hidden but, needless

to say, Periander's horrific public humiliation of the Corinthian women was considered beyond the pale, and held up as an example of "the sort of thing that tyranny is, and of what sort of deeds it is capable" (5.92g.4). Although Periander himself suffered no reprisals, the story of his misdeeds convinced the Greek city-states not to reinstate a tyrant at Athens.

A parable of sorts illustrating a similar theme appears in the *Varia historia* of the Roman rhetorician Aelian (c. 175–235 CE). In this story, an unnamed tyrant (*tyrannos*, see note 4), wishing to remove any possibility of conspiracies and plots against himself, ordered the people of his city not to converse with each other *at all*, either in public or in private. The situation was not merely difficult but practically impossible. Yet the people dealt cleverly with the tyrant's command: they would nod and gesture toward each other and closely observe each other's expressions, noting whether someone felt unhappy or calm or cheerful. In short, people's emotions were on display for everyone to see. This, too, vexed the tyrant, who was absolutely certain that even silence, when accompanied by gestures, could result in some evil plot against him. So he put a stop to it by forbidding these sorts of unspoken expression as well. Then one man, who, like the rest, was out of patience, furious at the impossible situation, and fervently desiring an end to the tyrant's oppressive rule, went to the city center and shed copious tears. A crowd gathered around him, sharing his grief. When the tyrant heard that the people were no longer using gestures for communication but that tears were now in vogue, he determined to stop this as well. Surrounded by his bodyguards, he went to confront the crowd in person to somehow restrain people from crying. But when the people saw the tyrant approaching, they seized the guards' weapons and killed him on the spot (VH 14.22; see Hansen 2017: 202–3).

Unlike Herodotus's story of Periander and Melissa, Aelian's parable is not based on any one specific cruel and unreasonable leader. But both stories share a level of exaggeration intended to illustrate just how far beyond the bounds of reasonable human behavior a tyrant can go. Both stories are intended to act as deterrents, encouraging people to ensure that their leaders enforce just laws rather than acting according to personal, often-paranoid whims and irrational bursts of anger. Similarly, various ancient fables provide commentary on abuse of power. Many Greek and Roman fables provide attacks on "adherence to the traditional values of wealth, power, beauty, pleasure, as well as that of the nobility of origin; they also attack boasting and presumption in general" (Adrados 1999–2003: 1:615). As several other contributors have pointed out in this volume, animals were likely employed in fables both to expose human flaws and to make the demonstrated human flaws more acceptable (also Teeter 2002: 255). Fables often speak through metaphors and personification so as to provide a safe, innocuous outlet for social and political commentary that, if expressed directly, could prove offensive or even dangerous. As a result, dozens

of fables illustrate the nature of power, how the strong tend to abuse their power, and—as in Aelian’s parable—how tentative one’s hold on power may be.

For example, the Aesopic fable of “The Wolf and the Lamb” shows how a tyrant can always find an excuse for tyranny. A wolf, seeing a lamb that had strayed from its flock, did not want to attack and seize it by force. Rather, the wolf sought a reasonable excuse for his hatred. So he has the following accusatory exchange with the lamb:

Wolf: “You slandered me a year ago, when you were small.”

Lamb: “A year ago? But I wasn’t even born yet!”

Wolf: “But aren’t you grazing in a field that belongs to me?”

Lamb: “I haven’t eaten even a single blade.”

Wolf: “But didn’t you drink from the spring I drink from?”

Lamb: “No, I’m still nursing at my mother’s teat!”

At that the wolf seized the lamb and, as he contentedly munched, commented, “You’re not going to make me go supperless, even if you easily refute every accusation!” (Babrius 89; P 155, G 130; ATU 111A). Laura Gibbs notes the striking similarities between this fable and one from the Buddhist *Dīpi-Jātaka*, in which a stray goat tries to fend off a hungry panther (2002b). The panther accuses her of having stepped on his tail, but she replies that, as they approached each other face-forward and his tail was behind him, she could not possibly have done so. No matter what reasonable excuse the goat offers in response to the panther’s trumped-up accusations, he persists and, like the wolf in Aesop’s fable, ultimately seizes her and eats her up. The *Jātakas*, which date from the fourth century BCE to the fifth century CE, are folktales about the lives of Buddha. The stories, many of which are animal fables, illustrate the Buddha’s many virtues and seem to have been intended to instruct young princes in “manners and morals and state-craft,” including the most effective and compassionate ways to rule (Barret 1948: 66). Given the time frames for two fables presented here, the point is not whether one culture’s story influenced the other, but that both cultures took a dim view of tyranny and found animal metaphors a useful and safe medium in which to present that perspective (cf. Adrados 1999–2003: 3:565–7, 576–94, 615–28).

“The Wolf and the Lamb” is also one of several fables that provide succinct examples of the long-standing aphorism “might makes right,” acknowledging that brute force often prevails simply by the rules of nature, and no number of arguments, pleas, or tricks can defeat it; abuse is expected from the strong (Adrados 1999–2003: 1:616). This concept appears as early as the eighth century BCE, in Hesiod’s story of “The Hawk and the Nightingale” (*Works and Days* 202–12). As Ken Kitchell explains in Chapter 4, a nightingale captured

by a hawk complains bitterly about it, but the hawk simply tells the nightingale that it is foolish for the weak to contend with the mighty.<sup>7</sup> Many fables express the similar sentiment that “the powerful must not be challenged” (Adrados 1999–2003: 3:204). One of these, which has many variations, involves a lion and two other animals dividing the spoils of a hunt they have gone on together. In the variation known as “The Lion, the Ass, and the Fox,” the lion orders the ass to divide the catch. He makes three equal piles, and the lion devours him on the spot. The lion then orders the fox to divide the catch, and the fox wisely makes one very large heap and one very small heap. When the lion asks the fox who taught him to divide the shares in this way, the fox answers that it was the misfortune of the ass that taught him (3:204). Other versions have a lion, wolf, and fox (P 149, G 15). The fable bears a similarity to ATU 80A\*, “Who Gets the Booty?” in which three animals—usually some combination of wolf, fox, bear, donkey, camel, dove, badger, and crane—seek to divide the spoils of their hunt, and decide to give it all to the oldest among them, but the strongest of the animals (usually the wolf, bear, or camel), while admitting he is younger, nevertheless makes off with the catch.<sup>8</sup> In short, despite pointing out the dangers of tyranny, stories from antiquity also cautioned that, under certain circumstances, yielding to authority might be the safest and therefore most necessary course of action.

## CHALLENGING POWER

Whereas some stories suggest that the powerful should not be challenged and that arguments and tricks are of no use to those at a disadvantage in the established hierarchy, Adrados points out that fables (as opposed to other genres) expressing this theme are rare (1999–2003: 1:181). More frequently, fables as well as stories from prose authors such as Herotodus, Aelian, and others suggest that confronting the established power structure may result not only in success for the individual but also improvement for an entire group. Aelian’s parable above, while demonstrating how tyrants abuse power, also suggests that a united front can topple tyranny. But another major theme in ancient literature, especially fable, is that intelligence and cleverness can sometimes prevail over brute force and cruelty (1:616).<sup>9</sup>

Some such stories date back as far as third-millennium BCE Mesopotamia. Sumerian fables, like their Greek counterparts, “take the form of a story involving conflict and resolution, including both narrative and dialogue,” though unlike the Greek fables, they have no expressed moral (Foster 2002: 277). And in some of these Sumerian fables, “one animal outwits another despite its seemingly insuperable advantage” (277). For example, in contrast to the fable of “The Wolf and the Lamb,” a clever goat fares better against a lion in this Sumerian tale:

When the lion caught the weakling goat, she cried, "Let me go and I will give you my friend, the ewe, when we reach the fold." "If I am to let you go, tell me your name!" The goat answered the lion, "You do not know my name? My name is, 'I-Will-Make-You-Smart'." When the lion came to the fold he roared, "I let you go." She answered from the other side of the fence, "You have indeed become smart—in fair trade for no sheep!"

(Foster 2002: 278)

And in what may be the earliest analogue to ATU 80A (above), a fox divides the spoils of the hunt: "Once there were nine wolves, but ten sheep, one too many to divide among them. When the fox came upon them, he said, 'Let me divide the shares. For you, being nine, there is one. I, being one, will take nine. That is my preferred share'" (Foster 2002: 278). This fable may also be a very early variant of ATU 1533 form 2, "The Wise Carving of the Fowl." In this tale, in form 1, a clever man is asked to divide a chicken or other fowl appropriate among the members of his household. The man gives the head to the master and the neck to the wife (because the two belong together), the legs to the two sons (because they work to support the household), the wings to the two daughter (because they will "fly away" when they are married), and takes the body for himself. Form 2 seems to be a descendant of the Sumerian tale. Both forms appear in another ancient variant, this time from the *Midrashim*, rabbinical commentaries on parts of the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>10</sup> In the variant, a young man must claim his inheritance by demonstrating his cleverness to the landlord holding the inheritance in trust. At dinner, the landlord asks the young man to divide the five roasted pigeons fairly among the landlord, his wife, his two sons, two daughters, and himself. The young man gives one pigeon to the host and his wife, another to the two sons, another to the two daughters, and keeps the fourth and fifth pigeons for himself (ATU 1533 form 2; cf. ATU 1663). The astonished host says nothing, but then asks the young man to serve a roast chicken, only to be even more perplexed when the young man gives the head to his host and hostess, the legs to the sons, and the wings to the daughters. When asked to explain his actions, the young man says,

Thyself, thy wife, and one pigeon make three; thy two sons and one pigeon make three; thy two daughters and one pigeon make three; and myself and two pigeons make three also, therefore is it fairly done. As regards the chicken, I gave to thee and thy wife the head, because ye are the heads of the family; I gave to each of thy sons a leg, because they are the pillars of the family, preserving always the family name; I gave to each of thy daughters a wing, because in the natural course of events they will marry, take wing, and fly away from the home-nest. I took the body of the chicken because it looks like a ship, and in a ship I came here and in a ship I hope to return.

(Harris 1943: 349)

The landlord admits that the young man has identified himself sufficiently, and turns over the inheritance. In contrast to that implied between the fox and the wolves, there is no antagonistic power struggle here between the landlord and the young man, but the latter's cleverness has provided the means for him to attain his rightful position in society as heir to his father's inheritance.

A perhaps more well-known story exemplifying the theme of intelligence besting strength and power is the fable usually referred to as "The Fox and the Sick Lion" (P 142, G18, "The Fox, The Lion, and the Footprints," ATU 50A). A lion who has grown old and weak pretends to be very sick so that instead of having to hunt for food he can have all the other animals come to pay their respects to him in his cave, whereupon he will devour them. But when the fox comes to visit, she greets the lion from outside the cave. When the lion asks why the fox has not come inside, she replies, "Because I see many tracks going in, but none coming out." The fable was so well known in antiquity that by the first century BCE the Roman poet Horace could reference it with the briefest of summaries. Wishing to explain why he does not fall in with others' money-making schemes, he says, "as the cautious fox once answered the sick lion, I will reply, 'because the footprints terrify me—all facing *toward* you, none *from* you'" (*Epistle* 1.1.73–5). The fable can also be interpreted as a caution about falling under the influence of a powerful man, because, as the epimythium notes, you may have difficulty regaining your independence.

Related to this theme is that of the weak avenging wrongs done by those more powerful, as illustrated by "The Dung Beetle and the Eagle" (P 3, G 153; ATU 283H). In this fable, a hare fleeing from an eagle's talons beseeches a beetle to shelter it. The beetle then invokes Zeus's protection and implores the eagle to respect the offered asylum and not to disregard the beetle because of its small size. But the eagle simply flicks the tiny beetle aside and devours the hare. In revenge, the beetle goes to the eagle's nest and rolls out all its eggs, smashing them. The eagle cannot figure out who has done this, but nests again in a higher place. The beetle finds this nest, too, and crushes the eggs again. The eagle, grieving for its offspring, brings its next batch of eggs to Zeus in Olympus, placing them in the god's lap for protection. When the beetle hears this, he flies right into Zeus's face, startling the god, who jumps up, letting the eggs fall from his lap. So these eggs, too, are broken, and Zeus learns what the eagle did to the beetle and hare. When the eagle returns, Zeus says, "It is just that you have lost your eggs, since you mistreated the beetle."<sup>11</sup> Taking this reverse hierarchy one step further, the fable of "The Gnat and the Lion" illustrates how the least enemy may be the one that should be most feared (P 255, G 243; ATU 281 form 3). Here a gnat challenges a lion to a duel, boasting that the lion's power, based in its claws and teeth, is useless against the gnat. The lion wears itself out swatting uselessly at the gnat, who keeps biting the lion until the latter finally admits defeat. The victorious gnat flies away—straight into a spider's web. Unable to extricate himself, the gnat laments that



although he had vanquished a much more powerful creature, he himself was now dying at the hands of one even more insignificant than himself. As Adrados notes (1999–2003: 1:175), this fable combines the theme of the less powerful winner with that of the boastful champion defeated. An extended version appears in Achilles Tatius's novel *Leucippe and Cleitophon* (second century CE), ending with the gnat's cry: "Oh, the folly! For I challenged the lion, but a tiny spider's web has caught me" (2.22).

## WISE USE OF POWER

A number of stories from antiquity demonstrate why some people are worthy of the power they hold. For example, in his *Histories*, the fifth-century Greek author Herodotus devotes a large section to the history of Egypt, including pharaonic dynasties. His King Rhampsinitus may have been based on one or more historical pharaohs of Egypt, such as Rameses II (r.1279–1213 BCE), but Herodotus places him much earlier, in the twenty-sixth century BCE, as the immediate predecessor of Cheops (whose construction of the Great Pyramid Herodotus also describes). In any case, Rhampsinitus himself is not a historical figure. Nevertheless, Herodotus uses his construct of Rhampsinitus to present one of our earliest known versions of "The Master Thief" (ATU 950).<sup>12</sup> Herodotus says that he heard the story of Rhampsinitus from Egyptian priests, his main source of information about Egypt: "these are the things the priests of the Egyptians said" (2.120.1). This suggests a strong oral tradition for the story. Herodotus's is the earliest known written version of the tale and is thus not strictly Egyptian, but rather filtered through a Greek lens. While the story consists primarily of a contest of wits between a king and a thief (Hansen 2002: 358), it also illustrates how a ruler might wield power positively and how a person of low status can attain it—both of which are recurrent themes throughout Herodotus's *Histories*, the larger framework of which centers upon the inability of the Persian monarch and his vast forces to defeat the Greeks and their debate-based, more democratic form of government.

In the story, King Rhampsinitus had amassed a vast quantity of wealth. Wanting to protect his riches, the king had a great stone treasury built to contain it all. But the stonemason secretly designed one stone to be easily removed, and when he was on his deathbed told his two sons about the removable stone so that they would be provided for. Following their father's instructions, they carried away a sizeable amount of the king's wealth. When the king next opened the chamber and saw so much missing from the storage vessels, he was astounded; the treasury had been well guarded and its seals were still intact. But after a second and third raid, Rhampsinitus had traps placed inside the building. When the two brothers next broke in, one of them was inextricably caught in a trap, and advised that his head be cut off so that they would not be recognized. So the one brother cut off the other's head and carried it away, and the king was

then even more mystified to find in his treasury a body with its head entirely missing. In an attempt to catch the other thief, Rhampsinitus had the decapitated body hung from the treasury wall, setting guards over it with orders to arrest anyone mourning the corpse. But the surviving brother got the guards drunk and retrieved the body when they fell fast asleep. At this, the king resorted to an outlandish extreme, about which Herodotus himself comments, “I don’t believe this” (2.121.e): the king had his own daughter prostitute herself, telling her to take all clients, to ask each one to tell her the cleverest thing he had ever done, and to detain whoever told a story matching the thief’s actions. But here again the thief outwitted the king. Cutting the arm off a fresh corpse and hiding it under his cloak, he went to see the princess and told her his story. Realizing this was the person her father sought, she grabbed hold of him—or so she thought; he had extended the corpse’s arm, not his own, and slipped away from her. At this point, Rhampsinitus was so impressed by the man’s creativity and boldness that he sent out a proclamation promising immunity and a reward if only the culprit would reveal himself. The thief, trusting the king, came forward; Rhampsinitus kept his word, calling the thief the “most clever of men” and rewarding him with the princess’s hand in marriage (2.121.f).

In this early version of “The Master Thief,” Herodotus presents a king who, though understandably upset, does not take out his frustration on the entire population or even on the thief, as a more tyrannical leader such as Periander might have done. Rather, instead of abusing his power, Rhampsinitus tries to match wits with the thief, ultimately conceding that the thief surpasses him. The story also demonstrates the possibility of a poor man of certain abilities rising to higher status, inasmuch as the thief marries into the king’s family.<sup>13</sup> Herodotus ends his story of Rhampsinitus by saying that all through Rhampsinitus’s reign Egypt was well governed and thrived, providing a sharp contrast to Herodotus’s description of the next pharaoh, Cheops, who brought the Egyptians “all kinds of wickedness” (2.124.1), forcing them to work on his pet projects (such as the pyramid). Though not a folktale, Herodotus’s account of Cheops highlights the results of abuse of power, as the new pharaoh shuts down temples and the social and religious life of his people, enslaving them all for his own glory.

Ancient fables, too, occasionally demonstrated appropriate use of power. Several of these focus on the lion, king of the beasts. One such tale is that of “The Lion and the Mouse” (P 150, G 70), which illustrates ATU 75, “The Help of the Weak.” This fable had many variants even in antiquity, with one of the earliest coming from the late period of Egypt (c. tenth to fourth centuries BCE):

There strayed into [the lion’s] paw a little mouse, small in size, tiny in shape. When [the lion] was about to crush him, the mouse said to him: “Do not crush me, my lord the lion! If you eat me you will not be sated. If you release me you will not hunger for me either .... If you spare me from destruction, I shall make you escape from your misfortune.” The lion laughed at the

mouse and said: "What is it that you could do in fact? Is there anyone on earth who would attack me?" But [the mouse] swore an oath before him, saying: I shall make you escape from your misfortune on your bad day!" Now although the lion considered the words of the mouse as a joke, he reflected, "If I eat him I shall indeed not be sated," and he released him.

Now it happened that there was a huntsman with a net who set traps and had dug a pit for the lion. The lion fell into the pit and fell into the hand of man. He was placed in the net, he was bound with dry leather straps, he was tied with raw straps. Now as he lay suffering on the mountain, in the seventh hour of the night, Fate wished to make his joke come true, because of the boastful words that the lion had spoken, and made the little mouse stand before the lion. He said to him: "Do you recognize me? I am the little mouse to whom you gave the breath of life as a gift. I have come in order to repay you for it today, and to rescue you from your misfortune, since you are suffering. It is beautiful to do good to him who does it in turn." Then the mouse set his mouth to the fetters of the lion. He cut the dry straps; he gnawed through all the raw straps with which [the lion] had been bound, and released the lion from his fetters. The mouse hid himself in his mane, and he went off with him to the mountain on that day.

(Lichtheim 2006: 158–9)

This Egyptian version does not merely illustrate the benefits of compassion toward those weaker than oneself. It also provides a relatively gentle remonstrance against boasting as well as exemplifying what Emily Teeter calls the "symbiotic existence of the weak and the powerful" as the mouse rides off in the lion's mane (2002: 257). Later Aesopic versions echoed the Egyptian fable, with the Greco-Roman narratives following this basic plot: some mice were playing near where a lion was sleeping, when one accidentally ran over the lion, awakening it. The lion grabbed the poor little mouse in his paw and was about to kill it when the mouse begged for mercy, explaining that he had not meant to wake the lion. The lion decided that killing such a small, defenseless creature would "be a cause for reproach rather than glory," and so forgave the mouse and let it go. A few days later, the lion fell into a trap and could not get out. The mouse heard him roaring and came running. Recognizing him as the same lion who had been merciful, the mouse said, "I have not forgotten the kindness that you showed me!" And the mouse proceeded to gnaw through the cords of the trap, freeing the lion (Figure 8.1).<sup>14</sup> Rather than stressing the symbiotic relationship present in the Egyptian tale, the Greco-Roman fable shows how judicial restraint (or non-abuse) of power, especially regarding one's inferiors, can benefit a ruler. The theme also appears in "The Hare and the Lion's Justice" (B 102; P 334, G 20), where a lion king who was neither hot-tempered nor cruel did not enjoy acting violently. Rather, he was calm and just. It was said that during his reign all the wild animals gathered together to have their cases



FIGURE 8.1: The Lion and the Mouse. Sand sculpture at Weston-super-Mare, by Rachel Stubbs, 2014. Public domain.

tried. All of them had to provide accountings for their actions: the wolf for his actions toward the lamb, the leopard toward the goat, the tiger toward the deer. And all the animals kept the peace. The shy hare said, “Oh, but I have been praying for this day forever—a day that will make the weak formidable even to the strong.”

Also illustrating the power of the weak before the mighty, the victory of reason over physical strength, and the theme that foolish and dangerous natural behavior may be overcome by “good manners” is the late period Egyptian story of two jackals and a lion (Teeter 2002: 257). Seeing the lion approaching, the jackals suppress their natural instinct to run and instead stand their ground. When the bewildered lion requests the reason for their unusual behavior, the jackals explain, “You would have overtaken us anyway and why should we tire ourselves before we are eaten?” Since the lion, “the representation of power in the story,” recognizes the sense in this, he lets them go (258).

## ASPIRING TO POWER BUT UNQUALIFIED TO HOLD IT

What happens when someone aspires to power, but is highly unqualified for the powerful position? A number of tales from antiquity address this question, one that illustrates the results of undesirable qualities such as impatience, greed, and hubris. One of the most popular such stories, that of the magician’s apprentice—

perhaps familiar to modern audiences from the Mickey Mouse segment of Disney's *Fantasia* (1940)<sup>15</sup>—is at least two thousand years old. The earliest written version of the tale known as “Apprentice and Ghost” (ATU 325\*) appears in the *Philopseudes* (“Lover of Lies”), by the second-century CE satirist Lucian, but, as William Hansen argues, must draw upon much older versions given how well attested the story is and how many set motifs were already evident in Lucian's time (Hansen 2002: 37). In the *Philopseudes*, Lucian mocks superstitious people who believe in magic, and this particular story presents an exaggerated version of other ancient Greek accounts of sorcerers and their (alleged) miracles.<sup>16</sup> The tale is also instructive regarding not only how one might have “magical” power but also regarding the relationship between powerful men and their underlings, providing insights into perspectives from both sides.

In the story (Lucian, *Philopseudes* 33–6), the narrator Eucrates tells of how, when he was younger, he became the apprentice to Pancrates, an Egyptian magician whose name literally means “all-powerful.” Pancrates had power over nature; for example, he would ride on the backs of crocodiles and even swim among them, and they were so tame in his presence that they “would crouch down before him and wag their tails” (34). Pancrates told Eucrates to leave his servants behind on their journeys, and Eucrates soon found out why: whenever they stopped overnight at an inn, Pancrates would take the door-bolt or a broom, dress it up in clothing, and utter a certain spell over it. Then it would start to walk around and do the chores: it would go off and draw water, buy fish, cook meals, and generally do everything else a human servant would do. Everyone mistook it for an actual person. When Pancrates no longer needed its services, he intoned a different incantation and turned the bolt back into a bolt or the broom into a broom. Eucrates was certainly interested in having this kind of power over inanimate objects, but Pancrates would never agree to teach him the spell. So, one day, Eucrates hid while Pancrates performed the spell, and overheard the “trisyllabic” incantation (35). When Pancrates went out on an errand, Eucrates took a broom (or pestle), pronounced the syllables, and ordered it to draw water. The creature did as instructed. But when it had brought enough water, Eucrates realized he did not know the counterspell, and a simple “Stop drawing water!” command did not work (36). So the enchanted broom kept drawing water until the house was overflowing. Concerned that Pancrates would be exceedingly angry, Eucrates tried to destroy the animated broom by cutting it in two with an axe. This merely resulted in both halves continuing to draw water. When Pancrates returned, he was indeed furious, and after turning the creatures back into wood he ended the apprenticeship.

Stories of miracle-workers and other practitioners of magic in antiquity typically characterize the sorcerers as having some control over the natural world, such as an ability to control the weather or tame wild animals; snake charming was a prominent trait (see Ogden 2002: 10–16, 49–50, 61–72). Lucian's tale of the magician and his apprentice reflects and exaggerates such

characterizations by granting Pancrates the godlike power to create and destroy life (of a sort) by imbuing an inanimate object with the ability to move and to understand basic commands.<sup>17</sup> Although Pancrates was a wonder-worker who taught Eucrates many things, this power was not one of them; rather, although, as Eucrates admitted, Pancrates shared virtually all his other knowledge, he guarded this particular power jealously and viewed Eucrates' premature attempts to attain that power as enough of a betrayal to end their relationship. Moreover, Pancrates does not appear to use any of his power for anything other than personal convenience, in contrast to other alleged miracle-workers of the same period, such as Apollonius of Tyana (first century BCE).<sup>18</sup> Lucian's tale about Pancrates might also provide a veiled commentary about ancient attitudes toward servants, given that under the Roman Empire (the backdrop for this story), such household servants, being slaves, were considered property rather than people and had few rights.

Pancrates' apprentice, impatient and foolish, thought he had learned enough to wield great power. But he sought it too soon and lost his chance to learn more from Pancrates. A number of other stories from antiquity, including fables, express a similar theme: that the trappings of power cannot compensate for an unqualified leader. One fable epitomizing this theme is that of the fox and the monkey ("The Monkey Elected King of the Animals," P 81, G 24). At an assembly of the animals, the monkey does a dance. The animals were so impressed that they elected the monkey to be their king. But the fox, envious of the monkey, plotted its downfall. Seeing some meat lying in a trap, the fox led the monkey there, saying that the meat was a treasure she had been guarding to save it for the monkey. The monkey grabbed the meat and was caught in the trap. When he accused the fox of misleading him, the fox replied, "How can you rule over the beasts when you yourself are so stupid?" (Figure 8.2).<sup>19</sup> The fable illustrates that simply being awarded a position of power does not make one a capable ruler; ideally, one must first demonstrate intelligence and leadership abilities.

Similarly, in "The Peacock Elected King of the Birds" (P 219, G 22), an assembly of birds debates which among them should be king. The peacock says, "I am best suited to be king, because of my beauty." All the birds find this an acceptable reason except for the raven, who comments, "If you become king, what will happen when the eagle attacks? Are you strong enough to rescue us from him?" The epithymium attached to this fable explains that kingship is not intended for those who are merely beautiful, but for those who have physical prowess and other qualities that might be considered important in a leader. Another popular example for the Greeks and Romans was "The Donkey in Lion's Skin" (P 188, G 322; ATU 214B), one version of which appears in the fables of Babrius (second century CE). A donkey, having donned a lionskin, thought himself fearful to all men. When he pranced about in this habiliment,





FIGURE 8.2: The Fox, the Monkey, and the Animals. Illustration by Percy J. Billingham, 1899, from *A Hundred Fables of La Fontaine*. Public domain.



everyone fled before him. But when a strong wind rose up, the lionskin slipped from his back, revealing him to be a donkey. Then someone beat him with a stick, saying “You were born a donkey; don’t pretend to be a lion” (B 156). In one variant a self-deluded donkey, rather than being exposed by the wind, gives herself away by braying. Similar fables were popular in the East, as evidenced by this version in the Buddhist *Sihacamma-Jātaka*:

There was a Merchant who used to go about hawking goods, which a donkey carried for him. Wherever he went, he used to take his bundle off the ass, and throw a lionskin over him, and then turn him loose in the rice and barley fields. When the watchmen saw this creature, they imagined him to be a lion, and so durst not come near him. One day this hawker stopped at a certain village, and while he was getting his own breakfast cooked, he turned the ass loose in a barley field with the lionskin on. The watchmen thought it was a lion, and durst not come near, but fled home and gave the alarm. All the villagers armed themselves, and hurried to the field, shouting and blowing on conchs and beating drums. The ass was frightened out of his wits, and gave a hee-haw! (*Jātaka* 189; Cowell 1895)

At this, the Bodhisatta (one who will become a Buddha) exclaimed that the creature was no predator, but merely a donkey with a lionskin over his back. When the villagers learned this, they attacked the donkey, beating it to death. The Merchant lamented, “The donkey, if he had been wise / Might long the green barley have eaten; / A lionskin was his disguise: / But he gave a hee-haw, and got beaten!” (*Jātaka* 189; Cowell 1895). Comparable metaphors on the appearance versus the nature of power and ability appear in “The Jackdaw and the Eagle” (P 2, G 341, B 137), in which a jackdaw realizes its own foolishness in trying to imitate an eagle, and “The Mice and the Weasels” (P 165, G 455), in which mice, recognizing their inferiority in a battle with weasels, try to compensate by electing generals who, to appear more intimidating, wear horns on their heads. When the weasels next attack, the other mice are able to scurry quickly into hiding places, but the horns prevent the mouse-generals from escaping into their holes, instead allowing the weasels to catch and kill them.

## POWER RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN AND AMONG THE SEXES

A chapter on power in ancient tales would not be complete without at least some discussion of relationships between the sexes. We have already seen above that Periander abused both his wife and the women of Corinth with impunity (unless posthumously being held up as a paradigm of tyranny is sufficient retribution). King Rhampsinitus of Egypt had no qualms about ordering his daughter into prostitution to catch a criminal and then marrying her to that same lowborn

criminal, though one might hope that the esteem in which Rhampsinitus held the thief and the consequent elevation of the thief's status via royal marriage mitigated the daughter's situation somewhat.<sup>20</sup> It should not come as a surprise to anyone to hear that in these largely patriarchal ancient societies women were subordinate to and dependent on men. When King Acrisius of Argos received a prophecy that he would meet his death at the hand of his daughter Danaë's son, he shut her up in a tower to ensure that no man could get near her. This backfired spectacularly, as attempting to avoid one's fate usually did in classical literature. After finding out that Danaë had been impregnated (allegedly by the god Zeus) and had given birth to a boy, Acrisius shut them both up in a chest and threw the chest out to sea in the hope that they would drown. Of course they did not, and the boy, Perseus, did eventually—if accidentally—kill his grandfather.<sup>21</sup> The “helper-maidens” such as Ariadne and Medea subordinated themselves to the heroes Theseus and Jason, who merely used them to accomplish deeds that helped elevate the men to their thrones and then discarded these maidens who had helped them—Theseus, by sailing away from Naxos leaving Ariadne behind, and Jason, by rejecting Medea for another princess.

It may be worth noting that many of these female characters ended up faring relatively well despite being abused. Danaë was saved from an undesirable marriage (see below); Ariadne married the god Dionysus; and Medea, having taken murderous revenge on Jason by killing his two heirs and new bride, escaped and allied herself with the king of Athens, though she eventually lost a power struggle there to Theseus, the king's son. Like Medea, other wives in ancient tales occasionally get the better of their ungrateful husbands, at least temporarily. Clytemnestra, accustomed to ruling in her husband Agememnon's stead while he was away fighting at Troy, kills him upon his return (but is herself killed by their son). And Herodotus tells a story of King Candaules and his wife that reflects the king's abuse of his status as both ruler and husband. Candaules was so enamored of his own wife that he insisted upon showing her naked to his faithful servant Gyges, who protested that this would be a terrible violation of custom. Candaules insisted, and arranged for Gyges to spy on his wife. But the queen—who remains nameless despite her influence on the course of history—noticed the transgression, and presented Gyges with a devastating choice: either kill himself for having brought shame to her, or kill Candaules, take the throne, and marry her. He chooses the latter. Candaules thus dies for his foolishness, and although the gods spare Gyges, they bring retribution on his family several generations later for killing his king (Herodotus 1.7–13).<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps our best evidence for power dynamics within families and among the sexes in ancient folktale comes from Apuleius's story of Cupid and Psyche (second century CE, ATU 425B), not least because, as others have pointed out in this volume, it is without question the most elaborate fairy tale from all of classical

antiquity. While the tale contains examples of power struggles between parents and children and between husbands and wives, as in the stories above, it more notably contains early detailed examples of the often antagonistic relationships between siblings and between mothers- and daughters-in-law that appear so frequently in later fairy-tale tradition. In its opening lines, the story already sets up one typical toxic relationship common to fairy tale: “In a certain city lived a king and queen, who had three daughters famous for their stunning looks. But the beauty of the two elder daughters, while indeed extremely pleasing, was nevertheless able to be described in human terms. In truth, however, the beauty of the youngest girl was so remarkable that it was unable to be sufficiently praised—unable even to be expressed—by human speech, which lacked the words to describe such exquisite loveliness.” The two unnamed older sisters become extremely envious of their younger sister, Psyche, when her beauty results in her marriage to a god and she becomes pregnant with his child. Their increasing envy and her ongoing credulity cause the sibling relationship to deteriorate to the point where the two manipulate Psyche into betraying her husband, who consequently abandons her, resulting in her difficult quest to win him back. The relationship among the three girls resembles later fairy tales wherein two elder, less beautiful sisters, by virtue of their more powerful position in the household, mistreat a younger, prettier stepsister (as in “Cinderella,” ATU 510A).

While Psyche’s unfortunate relationship with her sisters plays a crucial role in the narrative, the antagonism directed toward Psyche from her mother-in-law, Venus, comprises an equally significant part of the story. Psyche had unintentionally earned Venus’s enmity when word of the princess’s unearthly beauty had spread not only throughout her parents’ kingdom but also into neighboring regions, resulting in her being worshipped as if she were Venus herself come down to earth—to the extent that Venus’s own altars were deserted while people flocked around Psyche. The goddess was absolutely furious, and ordered her son Cupid to punish Psyche by making the girl fall in love with the worst possible man. But Cupid himself fell in love with her and instead arranged matters so that Psyche ended up in his palace, though he remained incognito. When Venus finds out that Cupid disobeyed her, she again becomes furious—but takes out the brunt of her anger on Psyche rather than on Cupid. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how the gods play a minimal role in ancient folktales, and that is still largely the case here: Apuleius casts Venus less in the role of goddess and more in the role of the typically hostile mother-in-law who thinks the girl is not good enough for her son. When Psyche arrives at Venus’s palace to throw herself at her mother-in-law’s mercy, Venus laughs heartlessly, drags her across the floor by her ear, and has her flogged.

Apuleius also situates Venus as the typical archenemy of hero quests, a person—often a king or usurper to a throne—in a powerful position abusing that power by setting tasks intended to be so difficult that the hero will fail to accomplish them and will either die trying or be utterly disgraced. We have

many examples from antiquity. Pelias overthrew the legitimate king of Iolcus and usurped the throne and, when Jason came to claim his rightful place as heir, sent the young man to fetch the Golden Fleece from the far reaches of the Black Sea, believing that the quest would be fatal. Similarly—picking up the story of Danaë and Perseus—King Polydectes, enamored of Danaë despite her strong disinterest in him, tried to get Perseus killed by sending him to cut off Medusa’s head. Venus, in contrast, sets not one but *four* seemingly impossible tasks for Psyche, the first three of which are familiar folktale motifs, including the aid Psyche receives from nature: sorting a pile of mixed grain, accomplished by compassionate ants; gathering golden wool from ill-tempered, sharp-horned sheep, with advice from a river-reed; and filling a vessel with water from the serpent-guarded source of the river Styx, aided by Jupiter’s eagle (Figure 8.3). The final task, however, proves too much for Psyche. After acquiring a box of beauty from Persephone, goddess of the underworld, having managed to travel there unharmed thanks to advice from a talking tower (!), Psyche breaks a taboo by peeking at the contents, and falls into a Stygian sleep. Cupid, still lovelorn, disobeys his mother again and rescues Psyche from her deep slumber.



FIGURE 8.3: Venus ordering Psyche to take water from a fountain guarded by dragons, by the Master of the Die. Jupiter’s eagle can be seen at the upper right helping Psyche fill the jar. Sixteenth-century print. Public domain.

The story ends with Cupid and Psyche happily married with Jupiter's blessing and Venus appeased when Psyche becomes a minor goddess. In these final vignettes we see antecedents for "Sleeping Beauty" (ATU 410), as the princess (Psyche) is cursed by a supernatural being (Venus) and falls into a deathly sleep, to be awakened only by her true love (Cupid) and bear his children. The slumber, as Bruno Bettelheim and others have suggested, may represent the transition from childhood into puberty, as the girl becomes a woman and formally takes on her role as wife and mother.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As evident from the stories presented here, ancient folk and fairy tales provide a great deal of commentary on the subject of power—its acquisition, uses, abuses, distribution, and many other aspects. Yet some of the most salient points about power appear in tales more closely aligned with history than with fiction, as in the stories from Herodotus, based on historical figures if not historical facts. Whereas ancient fable and other fiction often relied heavily on metaphor to avoid possible political retribution for unflattering portraits of leaders, Herodotus is often direct in his criticisms—and usually *can* be, because he writes about events from decades and centuries earlier and only hints at what might happen if current and future rulers abuse their power. In the prologue to his *Histories*, Herodotus explains why past events are worth recording, and simultaneously provides an oblique reminder of why countries and their leaders should wield power cautiously:

I will go ahead with my narrative, giving details about small and great cities alike. For many of those cities of men that were once great have become small, and many that have been great during my lifetime were previously small. Understanding, then, that human prosperity never remains for long in the same place, I will make mention of both equally.

(1.5)

This sentiment about the transitory nature of power and greatness, which also appears in many ancient fables, becomes the overarching theme in Herodotus's work. It appears most prominently in the story of Solon and King Croesus—in which the Athenian philosopher-statesman warns the Lydian king about the fleeting nature of happiness (1.29–33)—and in stories about Artabanus's advice to his nephew Xerxes, king of Persia (7.10e, 7.45–6).

Whereas Xerxes showed himself incapable of adopting the sort of perspective advised by his uncle and, according to Herodotus, lost his war against the Greeks largely because of this character flaw, Alexander the Great exhibited an ability to learn about the ephemerality of greatness, as seen in interpretations of the third-century CE *Alexander Romance*—admittedly a highly fictional work,

but one about a historical figure. In Chapter 1, Graham Anderson notes the many marvelous achievements attributed to Alexander the Great, including his exploration of the sea depths by means of a clever submersible contraption. But Alexander also wanted to explore the skies, as told in a tale that first appeared in the *Alexander Romance* (Rescension B 2.41) and soon spread across the Near East, through the Levantine and Persia. In this version adapted from the Hebrew Talmud, “The Great Are Also Little,” Alexander learns a lesson about power:

Though Alexander the Great had conquered vast territories and extended his empire farther than any that had existed before it, he remained dissatisfied. He wanted to achieve something even more unusual, something no human had ever experienced. So he ordered his hunters to capture several large birds and yoke them together. He then sat on their backs, speared a piece of meat, and raised it high. When the birds smelled the meat, they rose up in the air in pursuit of it. Alexander purposely held the meat out of the birds’ reach, causing them to fly higher and higher. Soon, the cities below him appeared tiny, and the people looked like insects. At first, this filled him with glory; but he suddenly realized that, while the people on earth looked like insects to him, *he* might look like an insect to *them*, and they would consider him inconsequential.<sup>24</sup>

As the birds flew increasingly higher, Alexander became fearful and lowered his spear so that the birds would head back toward earth. After a time, cities and people began to look their normal size again, and Alexander had learned his lesson. After he landed, he commissioned a statue that depicted him holding a small globe in his hand. He told the people that “even the mighty Alexander can look as insignificant as this tiny sphere” (Ausubel [1948] 1977: 567). In short, Alexander had gained an important perspective, and thereafter took care to use his power wisely.

Looking back in time through the stories presented here, it seems that very little has changed regarding attitudes toward power. Two thousand and three thousand years ago, people were expressing themes about power as they do now—about how to wield power wisely, about the terrible things that can happen when people abuse their power, and about how some people can abuse their power and get away with it. Ancient Mediterranean cultures existed long ago and far away, and one might be forgiven for thinking that societies living then and there must have been vastly different from those in the modern world; surely people in antiquity thought and felt differently from us, and had different values. But in fact, the stories in this chapter and, we hope, in this entire volume, illustrate ideal behaviors and opinions we still hold dear, and, in the end, demonstrate how and why tales from the ancient world are still relevant today.

## NOTES

### *Introduction*

1. Perhaps surprisingly, this is not an unreasonable distance for an eagle to fly with a sandal in its talons.
2. For Rhodopis and other early variants, see Anderson (2020: 55–63); see also de la Rochère et al. (2016: 1–6, 53). Regarding the “Rose-Red” aspect of the Rhodopis character/story, there appear to be no motifs connecting this tale with “Snow White and Rose Red” (ATU 426).
3. Some consideration of ancient Egyptian sandals is also helpful here, as they could be quite elaborate, especially for a woman of Rhodopis’s status. The Egyptians even incorporated gold in their sandals, if mainly for funerary use. For examples, see Footalk (2020).
4. See Bottigheimer (2010: 463), where she agrees with an earlier work by Dan Ben-Amos that labels “Cupid and Psyche” as a comic romance (1976: 217), as if that must be a completely separate genre. Contrast Anderson, who allows a definition of fairy tale that “treats romantic, fantastic, and magical themes in a strongly moral framework” (2019b: 24).
5. On Rhodopis specifically, cf. Mark (2017). Rhodopis is barely mentioned in de la Rochère et al. (2016), and Maggi does not reference it as an analogue despite discussion of the tale’s “abstract plot,” and despite acknowledging (as have others) Cinderella-like motifs in “Cupid and Psyche” with regard to Venus’s treatment of Psyche (2015: 150, 156).
6. Also of interest on this point is Jan-Öjvind Swahn’s attempt to trace the history of the Cupid and Psyche tale from Apuleius down through European *Märchen* (Swahn 1955).
7. Bottigheimer’s staunch position, “I refute arguments for the existence of rise fairy tales in the ancient world and in the Middle Ages” seems to emanate more from a position of intractable insistence on oddly narrow definitions than from a close consideration of all the evidence, including what Apuleius’s original Latin can tell us (2010: 447). She does begrudgingly admit that “‘Cupid and Psyche’ is one of the rare short narratives from the ancient world that valorizes human happiness, that



does not allow a supernatural to destroy a human protagonist's happiness, and that has a happy ending," noting that the story does, in fact, exhibit some significant fairy-tale characteristics even if it cannot, in her estimation, be classified as an actual fairy tale (2014: 31).

8. For an example of the problems evident in trying to shoehorn stories into genre definitions, it is worth noting that for over two decades folktale scholars have been speculating as to how early the "rise tale" appears—an entire issue the *Journal of American Folklore* (vol. 123, no. 490, 2010) was dedicated to the topic. "The European Fairy-Tale Tradition between Orality and Literacy" debated the role of sixteenth-century Italian author Giovanni Francesco Straparola in the development of fairy tale as a literary genre, inspired by—but not entirely agreeing with—Bottigheimer's argument in his favor (2002).
9. For just a handful of the many opinions about and attempts to define "fairy tale," see, for example, Bottigheimer (2010: 465); Zipes (2014: xxxv), on "fairy tale" specifically in relation to the Brothers Grimm; Canepa (2019a: 1–2); and Tatar (2019).
10. The evidence presented in this volume does not consider the relatively recent but widely critiqued phylogenetic work of da Silva and Tehrani (2016), viewed with skepticism by linguists, classical scholars, and folklorists alike as being both naïve and strained. See Laudun (2016) for discussion.
11. Sax (1998: 63), acknowledging the antiquity of the story, also situates it within the context of animal brides more generally.
12. The Hurrians inhabited regions across Mesopotamia, Syria, and Anatolia (modern Turkey), while the Hittites were based mainly in Anatolia.
13. As "The Prince and the Three Fates" in Buck (1965: 286–96), who uses a conception of "fairy tale" that includes supernatural elements, good triumphing over evil, and the protagonists living "happily ever after" (17–18). I acknowledge that Buck is certainly not a folklorist per se.
14. Kay Stone describes "The Two Brothers" as a "fairytale-like" story, noting that it is "a complex tale of two loyal brothers and their treacherous wives and how the brothers survive dire circumstances by using wisdom and magic" (2019: 430). For a cross-cultural examination of this tale, including twentieth-century adaptations, see Yohannan (1968).
15. For a good summary, see Haase (2008 s.v. "Greek Tales").

### Chapter 1

1. On Pliny's overall pattern of thought, see Beagon (1992).
2. The basic Greek verb *thaumazein* ("to wonder/marvel at") corresponds to the Latin verb *mirari*.
3. See the survey in Hansen (1996: 1–16).
4. Cf. Pliny (*NH* 7.35), who had seen the specimen in question.
5. The story is an early variant of ATU 704, "The Princess and the Pea." See Hansen (1997).
6. The Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century BCE) records similar information, but as part of his ethnographical interest rather than through a drive to amaze his audience. Ctesias's and Megasthenes' treatments of the wonders of India (fifth/fourth and fourth/third centuries BCE, respectively) come close to the borderline.
7. See Strabo (*Geographica* 2.1.9), where he also points out that it is not possible to trust such stories.

8. Elder Pliny (*NH* 9.26); Younger Pliny (*Epistulae* 9.33). On this story, see Kenneth Kitchell's discussion in Chapter 4.
9. Plato (*Symposium* 189c2–d6; c. 385–70 BCE); Achilles Tatius (*Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.17; second century CE).
10. On this episode and other variants, including the biblical Book of Jonah, see Coulter (1926).
11. For generic treatment, see Ferguson (1975).
12. Theopompus's description appears in a surviving fragment quoted by Aelian (*VH* 3.18).
13. In *Vita Apollonii* (6.19), a rather bizarre and hagiographic biography of the first-century CE philosopher Apollonius of Tyana, written by Philostratus of Athens (second/third centuries CE).
14. For the expansion of geographical knowledge and the consequences for fiction, see Romm (1992).
15. For the genre, see Lattimore (1942).
16. For example, in a letter to Julia Domna, Philostratus wrote, "Tell Plutarch not to take offence at the sophists" (*Epistle* 73). Plutarch had died decades before Julia was born, making this either an anachronism (one that brings into question the authenticity of the letter) or, more likely, a rhetorical device—on which see Kennedy (2003).
17. For monsters as symbols of barbarian threat, see Cohen (1996).
18. For hybridized deities, see Aston (2011).
19. The dialogue *Gryllus* is part of Plutarch's *Moralia* (first/second century CE).
20. On mythical metamorphosis, see Irving (1990); Buxton (2009).
21. E.g. for food, carrying burdens, or sex.
22. On which, see Doroszevska (2013).
23. This belief that bees (or wasps or hornets) were spontaneously generated from the sacrificed carcasses of cows and bulls gave rise to a ritual known as the *bougonia* ("ox-offspring"), which involved a special treatment of the ox carcass to facilitate the generation of bees from it.
24. The Greek Magical Papyri include prescriptions for making magical assistants (*daimones paredroi*).
25. The story also looks toward the Grimms' Hansel and Gretel, to be fattened up in the gingerbread house by a witch planning to roast and eat them.
26. For the eastward expansion of the story, see Stoneman et al. (2012).
27. Recension B 2.38. The various editions of the *Alexander Romance* are referred to by their edition (recension) names.
28. For the trio pantarbe, golden water, and manticore, see also Ctesias (*Indica* 1).
29. On the myths of Adapa and Etana (late third millennium BCE), see Dalley (1989: 182–8, 189–202). On Ninurta (early third millennium BCE), see Jacobsen (1987: 233–72). Gilgamesh (second/first millennium BCE): *Gilgamesh* Tablet XI.vi.
30. The tale, dating to c. 1990 BCE, is preserved in a single Saint Petersburg papyrus.
31. Inventory designation P. Berlin 3033, dated to the mid-second millennium BCE. The tale of Urbainer and his wife bears similarities to the adulterous bondage of Ares and Aphrodite in *Od.* 8.295–9.
32. For the tale analysis, see Uther (2004), ATU 300.
33. I have regarded fairy tales as a subcategory of folktales, with an emphasis on the element of wonder, but both terms tend to be used flexibly.
34. On this story (ATU 766) as it relates to "Rip Van Winkle," see Hansen (2002: 397–401).

35. Diogenes' work survived mainly through a summary by the ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius (*Cod.* 166).
36. Rudolf Erich Raspe's 1785 book *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia* saw his fictional protagonist, based on a real Baron Munchausen who enjoyed telling tall tales, undergo a series of increasingly impossible adventures—including a trip to the Moon.
37. The work probably dates to the first century CE.
38. The first two volumes are most likely either by Philostratus of Lemnos or his father, Philostratus of Athens (author of the *Vita Apollonii*). The third volume is attributed to the grandson of Philostratus of Lemnos, Philostratus the Younger.
39. For storytelling contexts, see Scobie (1979).

## Chapter 2

1. See also Hansen (2002) and Anderson (2000). On skeptical positions, see Bottigheimer (2014).
2. On the numbering systems for Aesop's fables, see Chapter 4. Aristophanes also refers to the fable of the dung beetle and the eagle in *Wasps* (422 BCE; 1448) and *Lysistrata* (411 BCE; 695).
3. The fable subsequently told in lines 472–5 is "The Crested Lark" (P 447, G 499).
4. See Perry (1962) and Adrados (1999–2003). On Aesop himself and the circulation of Aesopic fables in Greece, see also Jedrkiewicz (1989).
5. On this, see Chapter 4, and West (1978: 204–5); also Ercolani (2010: 204–6).
6. On which, see also Chapter 4.
7. A *senarius* is a Latin verse consisting of six iambic feet.
8. On the use of fables as characteristic of the lower classes, especially in Aristophanes, see Rothwell (1995).
9. Philocleon also refers to Aesop at *Wasps* 1401–5 (the fable of "Aesop and the Bitch"; Aes. 423, P 423, G 571); *Wasps* 1446–9 (Aesop falsely charged with stealing a temple cup). For more on fable in Aristophanes, see Schirru (2009).
10. Fr. 15 Baiter and Sauppe 1850 = [Pseudo] Plutarch. *Moralia* 848AB and fr. 13 Baiter and Sauppe 1850 = Isidore *Etymologies* 1.40.7, respectively, the fable of the sheep, dog, and wolves (P 153) and of the donkey and its shadow (P 460).
11. Hansen (2017: 27) defines this story a "personal fable."
12. The wasps and the partridges at the service of the peasant (fr. 34–5 W, P 215), The sick lion (fr. 225 W, P 142). Frogs ask Zeus for a king (fr. 272, 274 W, P 44, G 27). See Lasserre (1983: 63–4).
13. PMG 892, P196, "The Snake and the Crab" and PMG 889, P 100, "Zeus, Prometheus, Athena, and Momus," among others.
14. This is a variation on Thompson motifs D1337.1.1, "Charm Gives Magic Beauty" and D1860, "Magic Beautification."
15. The lions said, "Where are your claws and teeth?" (Antisthenes fr. 100 Caizzi 1966).
16. We find no allusions to folktales in the remnants of New Comedy, including Menander (c. 342–c. 290 BCE), though he makes extensive use of proverbs that may derive from fable. For more extensive discussion of the following examples, see Lelli (2004: 23–82).
17. Callimachus *Iamb* 1 also contains the moralizing fable of Bathycles's cup, another example of metaliterary polemic, see Lelli (2004: 7–22).

18. Cf. the line “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home,” from the nineteenth-century song “Home, Sweet Home,” lyrics by John Howard Payne.
19. On the Aesopic fable in the Latin satirical tradition, see Cozzoli (1995).
20. Kenneth Kittell discusses this fable in Chapter 4.
21. Other fable references in Horace include *Epistle* 1.1 (“The Fox and the Sick Lion,” Aes. 124), *Satire* 1.1.33–9 (“The Ant and the Grasshopper,” Aes. 373), 1.318–20 (“The Crow and the Feathers,” Aes. 101, P 472, G 328), and 1.10 (“The Deer and the Horse,” Aes. 269), among many others.
22. On the Lamia, see also Ingemark and Asplund Ingemark in Chapter 7, as well as Kittell in Chapter 4.
23. ATU 1510; on both stories, see Ingemark and Asplund Ingemark, Chapter 7.
24. For ghost stories in the ancient world, see Felton (1999) and Stramaglia (1999).
25. For the sources of this topic, see Braccini (2018: 108–10).
26. See also Chapter 6; on the *striga* specifically in Roman culture, Cherubini (2010).
27. On Apuleius’s *draco*-story, see Scobie (1977); for discussion of the later sources, see Braccini (2018: 124–6).
28. On criticisms, see Fehling (1977); Braccini (2018); Ingemark and Asplund Ingemark, Chapter 7.
29. Aes. 374, P 374, G 157. This tale, like the *Life of Aesop*, may derive from the *Romance of Abiquar* (Van Dijk 1997: 263).
30. Respectively, AP 6.219 = 64 G.-P.: cf. Aes. 436, P 436, G 244 and AP 7.210 = 63 G.-P.: cf. Aes. 227, P 227, G 181.
31. See Scappaticcio’s edited collection (2017).
32. “Moreover, Connis the Cilician and Thurus the Sybarite and Cybissus of Libya are mentioned by some as fablemakers” (*mythopoioi*; Spengel 1854–6: 73; Kennedy 2003: 24). More than five centuries later, in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, we find the surprising news, mentioned only here, that “the inventor of *fabulae* was Alcmeon of Croton” (1.40.1).
33. *Oratio* 7.207a. Here, perhaps, we see an incipient distinction between fable and fairy tale; see Van Dijk (1997: 61), contra Nøjgaard (1964: 551).

### Chapter 3

1. See Amore and Shinn’s excellent collection of tales, *Lustful Maidens and Ascetic Kings* (1981), arranged by gender, social roles, and values.
2. For example, Valmiki (1959: 7.56, 542–4), Kālidāsa (1851), Gitomer (1984: 204), and Dimmitt and Van Buitenen (1978: 271).
3. This text romanticizes the basic tale of the captured swan-wife (Eggeling 1900: 44:68–74). Handique quotes it at length, integrating it with the original verses from the *Rig Veda* (2001: 75–6). See also Gitomer (1984: 349–50).
4. See, e.g., “The Bank of the Celestial Stream,” in Eberhard ([1937] 1965: 21–5); Ralston ([1882] 1988: 44–74).
5. Nō plays are usually Buddhist plays. In *Hagoromo*, the woman is called a *tennin*, the Japanese translation of *apsarā*.
6. Miller cites an even earlier Japanese tale and others not included here (1987: 68, 76).
7. Hatto (1961: 328–31) has an interesting discussion of this story, but I cannot agree that it predates the *Rig Veda* tale of Urvaśī.

8. As indicated by an inscription contrasting the earthly female ghouls (*vetālīs*), who drink the blood of fallen enemies, with the *apsarās*, who deliver flirtatious glances while flying over a battlefield (Davidson 2002: 87–8).
9. Their becoming the wives of fallen warriors recalls the amorous relations between Valkyries and fallen heroes (Young 2018: 53–72). Also like the Valkyries, who could spread confusion and bind men to their will, *apsarās* were believed to possess men and to drive them mad.
10. The Kanda section of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (v. 1,1) is revealing of the tensions between sages and gods.
11. Translated in Dimmitt and Van Buitenen (1978: 258–62).
12. See Coomaraswamy ([1971] 2001: pt. 2, 33–4) on the fertility-granting powers of *apsarās*.
13. Courtesans were also considered as heartless as the *apsarās* (Young 2004: 105–19).
14. See, for example, Garimella (1998: 1:48–50). Marglin (1985) discusses some of these stories, as does O’Flaherty (1975: 42–52).
15. See, for example, the Buddha’s biographies (discussed below) and two sculpted panels at Bhārhut, described by Zimmer (1955: 70 and 193, plates 36a and 32a). See also Dehejia (1997: 46, fig. 35).
16. For example, in Vaidya (1958: 255–7).
17. See also Aśvaghoṣa (1999: 7:24–46), discussed below.
18. Smith discusses this curse and its enactment in Vedic ritual (1992: 17–45). He also demonstrates the ritualized ways that women’s fecundity is celebrated while women’s religious roles are diminished. Bennett discusses a Nepalese variant of this myth (1983: 215–18).
19. Kakar tells several other stories (1989: esp. 43–63). See also O’Flaherty (1980: 50–1, 109–12).
20. My thinking here has been influenced by Corwell and Lindisfarne (1994).
21. Bodhisattvas, both human and celestial, are beings awaiting final enlightenment.
22. Doniger explores such stories (1999: 260–302; 2000). See also Linn (1987: 5:495–502).
23. They are similar to the forest dwelling *yakṣas*, tree spirits, in their powers to withhold or bestow blessings, and the females are similarly depicted in iconography as voluptuous women, though the *nāginīs* (female *nāgas*) are often depicted as having the legless lower bodies of serpents or mermaids.
24. For a rich collection of essays, see Richman ([1991] 1994).
25. With the 2016 publication of *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*, Goldman and Goldman completed a seven-volume edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with the collaboration of leading Sanskrit scholars.
26. The few exceptions to this only prove the rule. See, for example, Babb (1975: 203). Additionally, in Nepal, some male specialists who battle witches wear women’s clothes (Allen 1992: 68–9). See also Ellen (1993: 97n5) and Slaats and Portier (1993: 140).
27. A point made by Ortnier in her discussion of the term *pem* (1978: 79).
28. For another story of Śiva’s creating the first witches, see Maskarinec (1995: 78–9).
29. See, for example, Roy (1929: 187–9); Bennett (1983: 307n3); Allen (1992: 68–9). Nepalese witches also worship Hārītī, a complex Buddhist divinity with a history of malevolent impulses. For her role in Nepalese witchcraft, see Gellner (1994: 32, 34). For her earlier history, see Young (2004: 39–41).
30. In other cases it simply believed that wives use magic in order to control their husbands (Bennett 1983: 182–5, 197–9).

31. Another well-known illustration of male power subjugating divine female power appears in the traditional Balinese ritual performances of Galugan, which include a ritual battle between the female witch Rangda and the male dragon Barong. See Bateson and Mead (1942: 174–5), Carman and Marglin (1985: *passim*), Howe (1984: 215), McKean (1982: 270–6), and Mills (1995: 250–1).
32. A similar tale from Korea appears in Zong (1970: 169–71).

#### Chapter 4

1. Gibbs (2008: x–ii) and Perry (1965: xxxv–xlvi) summarize the evidence for Aesop’s life.
2. Whatever distinction Quintilian intends between *fabella* and *fabula* is unclear. See G 282–3, P 158, where the nurse threatens to throw a wailing baby to the wolf.
3. The numbering system of fables is described immediately below.
4. Gibbs points out a Buddhist parallel: the goose has golden feathers, which the greedy owner plucks out all at once.
5. Perry (1965: xxxv–xlvi) summarizes the complicated evidence for early mentions of Aesop.
6. Holzberg (2002) provides compact surveys of all such issues.
7. Holzberg’s first chapter surveys such usages, which begin as early as Hesiod (2002: 11–38). Crying wolf: P 210; Sour Grapes: P 15. The numbering of fables is a vexing thing, as numbers are variously assigned by different authors such as Halm, Chambry, or Hausrath. Perry has complex tables showing equivalencies among the numbers (1952: 715–22).
8. For an evaluation of these claims, see Champlin (2005).
9. For a thorough overview of these verse fable collections, see Holzberg (2002: 39–71).
10. Laura Gibbs offers links to texts and translations to over 4,000 individual fables in Latin on her impressive webpage, <http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica> (accessed June 4, 2019).
11. Gibbs, for example, offers fables as Aesopic that are found only in manuscripts from medieval and Byzantine times. While some fables from these sources may be traced back to classical Aesopic fables, such a lineage is impossible to prove for any given fable.
12. G 276, 479, 481, 483, 517–18, 523, 526, 587; B 18, 63, 66 in the first case, G 253, 436, 507, 512, 564, 569; B 24, 72; Ph 1.2 in the second.
13. G 182, 205, 211, 413, 524, 533; Ph 4.15.
14. G 38, 64, 142, 202. In his preface to book 1, Phaedrus defends his depiction of talking trees. None appear in the extant fables, another indication that we do not have his entire work.
15. Regarding Joel Chandler Harris: we acknowledge the very problematic and controversial nature of his “Uncle Remus” stories, given his cultural appropriation of African American folklore as well as how the stories contribute to the perpetuation of white justifications of plantation culture. We include references to Chandler Harris’s collection here, however, due to its continued critical importance in scholarship on African American folklore as well as its role in the history of animal fable.
16. G 211, 225, 280, 305, 523, 572. Cf. G 157, where a vine talks to a goat. The trees adopted by the gods in G 205 are important to the tale, but have no real role in the action. Cf. also G 167 and 262.
17. B 19 has the fox apostrophize about the supposedly sour grapes. Only Phaedrus 4.3 has the animal address them.

18. From Phaedrus 4.3 = G 255, P 15. This and all other translations are by the author, unless otherwise noted. Translators commonly refer to foxes by their grammatical gender, rendering them all as “she” because *alōpex* (ἀλώπηξ) is a feminine noun. I avoid this practice whenever possible, using the neutral “it.”
19. While animals are frequent as shield types (Chase 1902: *passim*) this is a clear illustration of the fable.
20. Recalling Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (136–9).
21. Other examples include G 277 where a wall complains to a stake that had gouged it, and G 52, where two pots converse. Other vocal inanimate objects include a cowhide (G 208) and pots/jars (G 52, 207).
22. Cf. the drunk dog in G 571.
23. See Webster (1954) and Stafford and Herrin (2005).
24. Compare this chart with table 1 in Voultsiades and Tatolas (2005: 1878–9).
25. See discussions in Kitchell (2014: 108) and Thomas (2004, 2014).
26. G 126; cf. 199. Translation by Gibbs, who renders *tettix* (τέττιξ) as “cricket,” although the word is consistently used in antiquity for the cicada. The word for cricket was generally *akris* (ἀκρίς; Beavis 1988: 62–78, 93–103). Most modern versions render the ant’s heedless opponent as a dapper grasshopper.
27. Seals and bats (Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 697b1, *Hist. an.* 589a21); apes (*Hist. an.* 502a16, *PA* 689b32); humans (*Generation of Animals* 772b1). Cf. Theophrastus fr. 171.1.
28. The female spotted hyena has a prominent clitoris that resembles a penis (Frank and Glickman 1994). Regarding the question of whether, then, some cases of species fluidity occasionally extend to gender fluidity, we can note that there is a good deal of gender fluidity in the animal world. The hyena was believed to have both male and female generative parts, but that is a misunderstanding of its anatomy. In short, gender fluidity certainly existed in ancient stories, but does not end up as one of Aristotle’s dualizers. Such cases intrigued him mainly because he had difficulty assigning them to any single category.
29. Cf. Hansen (2002: 100–14). In Apuleius’s tale, other non-human parts of the natural world also help Psyche in other tasks heaped upon her by Venus: a river reed tells her how to gather fleece from fierce sheep (6.11–13), Jupiter’s eagle helps her obtain water from the serpent-guarded source of the river Styx (6.14–15), and a tower tells her how to reach the underworld (6.16–20).
30. The fable was so popular that it became a tale type: ATU 156.
31. Or “Androclus,” in Latin. See Aelian, *NA* 7.48 and Aulus Gellius 5.14. The motif also appears in fables G 72–3 (farmer and eagle) and in G 76 (kindly villagers and the panther in the well).
32. Cf. Pevnick (2014) for similarly unruly dogs on Greek vases.
33. Cf. Plutarch, *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* 149c-d.
34. Compare the supposedly true stories of dolphins who befriended young men (Pliny the Elder, *NH* 9.8; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 107).
35. Heath (2005: 6); cf. Sorabji (1993: 89–93), who summarizes the problem: “it is easy to find things well beyond the compass of animals, like advanced mathematics, but very difficult to find the supposed border itself” (93).
36. “Mind reading” refers to our ability to predict responses to our words or actions.
37. De Waal (2019) most recently has advocated for animal emotions.
38. See, for example, Wikipedia (2020) and Straughton (2016).
39. Cf. G 503, where dogs “change themselves” into humans. Suddendorf’s (2013) book is an excellent resource on the subject.



40. On the problematic nature of Chandler Harris's work, see note 15 above.
41. The raid is a lapine version of the Roman legend, "The Rape of the Sabine Women."
42. Eeyore is an exception, as opposed to Piglet or Tigger.
43. Cf. Harris (1881: ch. 1), in which Brer Fox invites Brer Rabbit to dinner, but upon his arrival Brer Rabbit sees no dinner—just a pan and carving knife ready on the table.
44. This may be a reference to a golden age, when humans and gods intermingled. See below.
45. G 180 is an action brought by a jar against a woman who broke it.
46. Ant "wars" do not qualify, being considered totally instinctual.
47. Papyri fragments exist of the original mock epic (West 2003: 258–63), and we know of a lost "Battle of the Spiders and Cranes."
48. We still see such "friendships" today. For example, Strong Impact, a successful thoroughbred at the 2014 Belmont race, had a faithful companion pig named Charlie (Lyll 2015).
49. Gibbs (2008: xv–xvii), calls these endomythia to separate them from *promythia* (moralizing introductions) and *epimythia* (summary moral statements).
50. Translation by Gibbs (161 = P 216).
51. The term builds on the influential concept of cultural literacy propagated by E. D. Hirsch (1987). Zwart notes, "fables are highly dependent on observer biases and cultural traditions" (Zwart 2005 quoted in Korhonen 2017: 38).
52. Boegehold (1999) does not address this vase specifically, but his chapter 2, with its illustrations, makes the point obvious.
53. For example, G 17, 18, 104, 113; cf. Horace, *Ep.* 1.17.73–5.
54. See, respectively, Oppian, *Hal.* 2.107–19; Aelian, *NA* 4.24, 64; and Oppian, *Cyn.* 3.449–60 and 4.448–53; and cf. Aelian *NA* 13.11.
55. G 24, 86. In G 398 a fox loses a bit of its tail in a trap, but escapes.
56. For example, G 86, 375, 553, 444, 550, 552, 596. This characteristic is typical of a trickster figure, as any Bugs Bunny fan can attest.
57. Compare Lefkowitz, who says that the "fable tradition occasionally eschews symbolism and anthropomorphism entirely, revealing a deep and abiding interest in animal behavior and in material that could be described as natural history" (2014: 150).
58. Ovid (*Amores* 2.6.35–6) even went so far as to claim that the crow lived nine generations and Aristophanes (*Birds* 609) claimed it was five. Wild corvid lifespans can exceed twenty years with some captive birds living into their sixties. See Bedrosian and Craighead (2007: 149) and the Euring list of longevity of European birds (Fransson et al. 2010).
59. Prose translation of the poetic text of Avianus (c. 400 CE). Hansen (2019) has collected other ancient versions of the fable.
60. Devecká (2013) provides an overview of the story.
61. Aelian adds some facts to the the story. Elephants hate the squealing of pigs (*NA* 1.38, 8.38); there are no pigs in India (3.3); pig flesh heals wounds on elephants (13.7); the Megara story, incorrectly substituting Antipater for Antigonos (16.36). A similar tale involving Alexander the Great appears in the medieval *Alexander Romance*.
62. Cf. the fantastical reason given by Lucretius 4.710–21. The rooster as lion's nemesis continued into medieval times.
63. See Peck (1991: 375). It is tempting to think the belief arose when people saw full-grown cuckoos leaving the nest of an eagle that had nest-hosted cuckoo eggs, but the cuckoo does not parasitize raptors.

64. G 237, translation by Gibbs.
65. On fable and the underdog, see Forsdyke (2012). On the (ab)use of power, Clayton (2008).
66. For example, G 65, 152, 278, 553, 568; B 7; Gregory (2007).
67. Sheep (G 67) and a donkey (B 129) envy the dogs' diet.
68. From the medieval version in Ademar of Chabannes. Ademar's rather poor Latin often forces a translator to guess at his meaning. G 408, B 108, Horace, *Sat.* 2.6.80–117. On Gibbs's use of medieval sources, see note 11 above. The fable comprises ATU 112; cf. ATU 201.
69. See, for example, Sorabji (1993: 80–93), Newmyer (1999, 2011), Szastyńska-Siemion (2011), Qui (2014), Kleczkowska (2016), Hawkins (2017), and Fögen (2014). Modern arguments center on efforts such as attempting to teach primates to communicate using sign language or symbols and to address the claims made concerning the talented parrot, Alex. See Hillix and Rumbaugh (2004: 46–68).
70. Yet in the world of fable humans still hunt animals. Even the authors who posited a golden age had difficulty with how humans could live in harmony with animals and still feed on them.
71. For overviews of the golden age, see Dillon (1992), Gera (2003: 18–67), and Heath (2005: 12–14).
72. All animals speak the same language: G 140; *Vita* G 99, 133; *Vita* W(estermanniana) 97, 133; *Vita* Pl (often called Accursiana) 300.12. Animals and humans share language: G 9; *Vita* G 97, 99. Cf. Kurke (2011: 133–4).
73. For example, Euripides, fr. 1086; Heracleitus as quoted by Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.10.3; Marius as quoted by Plutarch, *Apoph. Rom.* 202b; Marcus Aurelius 4.48.
74. In ancient Greece there was a lack of clarity between the terms for cat and weasel. Both were used for vermin control and the cat was less common. Even though Babrius wrote in Greek, he lived in Roman times when the cat was more prevalent and clearly distinguished from the weasel. See Kitchell (2014: 24–5, 193–6).
75. The ancient terms for crow and raven were often used interchangeably; cf. Arnott (2008: 109–10).
76. On the vagueness of the terms, Kitchell (2014: 5, 118–22).

### Chapter 5

1. Cylinder seals are small round cylinders, usually made of stone, carved with characters and/or figures. When rolled over a soft surface, such as clay, the seal produces an impression of the image.
2. In the threat these animals posed to human life, they differed from the Egyptian pantheon of theriomorphic deities that, despite their physical hybridity, served a separate function and were not considered monsters—at least, not in the same way. On representations of the monstrous in ancient Egypt, see Fischer (1987).
3. Lichtheim (2019: 534–8), who notes “the fairy-tale character of the story” (534). Dogs had long been domesticated by this time and were not generally in and of themselves feared; in this story (sometimes anthologized as “The Prince and the Three Fates”), the danger is posed by the prince potentially drowning in the lake, perhaps by tripping over the dog. The typical folktale motifs in this story include, among others, the long-desired birth of a child, an ominous prophecy at the child's birth, freeing a princess locked in a tower, and talking animal companions.
4. Lichtheim suggests that “The Island of Ka,” as it was called, translates as “phantom island,” which would reflect the island's disappearance (2019: 264). Bottigheimer

- notes the several features of this story typical of later fairy tales: a shipwreck, a monster, and the promise of untold wealth (2014: 11).
5. Eurydice, wife of the famed musician Orpheus, died of snakebite on their wedding day (e.g., pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library* 1.3.2; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.1–85). Philoctetes, a Greek soldier en route to fight at Troy, was bitten and did not die, but the smell from his festering wound was so repellent that the Greeks left him behind on the island of Lemnos (e.g., Sophocles, *Philoctetes*).
  6. Another example of guardian serpents appears in the Roman author Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (ATU 425): on her quest to fetch water from the river Styx, Psyche encounters serpents guarding the fountainhead (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6.14–15).
  7. Hesiod describes Cerberus as having fifty heads (*Theog.* 311–12); later authors settle on three. The hound's serpentine features appear at Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 2.5.12 and Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.417, among others. See also Ogden (2013a: 63–74).
  8. See, for example, Porada (1987: 1), Asma (2009: 1–15), Bremmer (1997: 2), Cohen (1996: viii), Gilmore (2003: 9); cf. Felton (2012: 103–31).
  9. Lowe (2015: 8–9), with an extensive discussion about these and other terms occasionally used in Greek and Latin for “monster.”
  10. Similarly, centaurs were known for being violent drunks, a notable exception being Chiron, who, unlike his brethren, was highly educated by Apollo in various skills (including medicine, music, astronomy, and archery). Chiron educated a number of Greek heroes, including Achilles, Perseus, and Jason.
  11. I use the Gibbs and Perry numbering systems as explicated by Kenneth Kitchell in Chapter 4. The Latin text used here is Avianus, fable 29 (c. 400 CE); this and all other translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. According to Uther (2004: 144), “Warming Hands and Cooling Soup with the Same Breath” (the official title of ATU 1342), the main version of which is this Aesopic fable, is found principally in Europe and the Indian subcontinent.
  12. Cf. the tale of “The Country Mouse and the City Mouse” (ATU 112), discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume.
  13. The traveler is described as joyful (*laetus*) once he feels warmer, and as enjoying (*frui*) his host's generosity, but all the other emotional signifiers describe the satyr.
  14. Cultural relativity of this sort was not a new perspective. The fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus provides an anecdote illustrating how monstrous one culture's customs can seem to another: “During his reign, Darius summoned the Greeks of his court and asked them for what price they would be willing to eat their fathers' bodies when they died, and they replied that they would not do it for any amount. Darius next summoned those Indians called ‘Callatiae,’ who eat their parents; in the presence of the Greeks, who understood through a translator what was being said, he asked what it would take for them to burn their dead fathers. Horrified, the Callatiae cried out that Darius should not speak such ill-omened words—so firmly entrenched are one's customs” (3.38.3–4).
  15. On monsters and space, see also Gloyn (2020: 27–33); on space in ancient folktale, see Doroszewska and Kucharski, Chapter 6; on liminal spaces as conducive to monsters, see Doroszewska (2018). At the same time, certain types of supernatural creature were not entirely absent from urban areas (Felton 2018a).
  16. Chthonic beings, including serpents, represent many different concepts in ancient mythologies, but prominent among them is the serpent as early goddess figure or

- consort of earth goddess, in part as symbolism the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. See, for example, Baring and Cashford (1991: 64–6, 499–500).
17. Ogden (2013a) provides a comprehensive study of “The Dragon-Slayer,” with a companion volume analyzing the dragon’s role in classical and medieval literature (2013b).
  18. Partially because they were not only stealthy but could strike unexpectedly and treacherously; cf. Aeschylus, *Choephoroi* 527–33. One ancient fable, “The Man Who Warmed a Snake,” tells of a farmer who took pity on a frozen snake, brought it home, and warmed it by the fire. Revived, the snake bites the farmer, who with his dying breath exclaims, “So this is how you show gratitude, by snatching life from the one who saved yours?” (P 176).
  19. The concept of successive generations of gods battling both their elders and monstrous creatures for power over the cosmos—namely, a succession myth—appeared in many Near Eastern myths, including the Hurrian-Hittite poems *Kingship in Heaven* and *Song of Ullikummi* (fourteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE; West 1966: 19–31). In these stories, a warrior-sky god from the younger generation gains cosmic supremacy by defeating older generations of gods, some of whom are depicted as terrifying monsters, others of whom enlisted fearsome monstrosities representative of the old universe to fight on their behalf.
  20. The pattern of culture vs. nature also derives from Near Eastern myth such as *Gilgamesh*, in which Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu fight the gigantic primitive monster Humbaba. For example, in conquering Humbaba the heroes cut down many trees in the Cedar Forest with the metal weapons (Tablet V). For more on monstrosity in *Gilgamesh*, see Lambert (1987).
  21. In the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, serpents and other dragon-like creatures fought by gods and heroes did not represent “evil” as they did in Christian literature. In such stories as St. George’s fighting the dragon or St. Patrick’s driving the snakes out of Ireland, for example, the serpents symbolize a variety of evils, such as sin and paganism, respectively. The Christian concept of the snake as evil hearkens back to the characterization of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. See also Ogden (2013a: 39–44).
  22. The fact that images of monsters are scarce in Paleolithic and Neolithic art and that such images became widespread with the emergence of early cities and states in the Near East about five millennia ago lends support to this primary theme underlying stories of heroes fighting monsters.
  23. Ogden (2013a: 82–96), too, counts Medusa among the dragon-related creatures slain by heroes.
  24. See also Ogden (2013a: 162–78) and Hansen (2002: 122–3). Cetus and other sea monsters of Greek myth represent not only the chthonic connection (given their serpent-like bodies) but also the dangers of the sea and sea travel.
  25. A number of other ancient stories adhere closely to “The Dragon-Slayer” as they include the rescue of a maiden (or youth) and other motifs included in the tale type. See, for example, the story of the boxer Euthymus and the Hero of Temesa (Pausanias 6.6.7–11) and stories in Hansen (2002: 124–30).
  26. The serpentine creatures faced by Heracles are enumerated in Ogden (2013a: 45–73, 183–4).
  27. Cf. Moses, when God asks him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt (Exodus 3–4). The “reluctant hero” is a common archetype in hero tales; see, for example, Robert Segal (1990).

28. As Hansen notes (2002: 263), the monsters in non-Jonah stories are “hostile adversaries” whereas Jonah’s fish acts on God’s orders.
29. This creature, more clearly than the fish in the Jonah story, also falls under ATU 1960, “The Great Animal,” specifically 1960B “The Great Fish” (see Hansen 2002: 178–81).
30. The old man and his son had built a temple to Poseidon inside the whale, but the narrative does not explicitly say that they prayed to be rescued from the whale. Even if they had, their prayers were clearly ineffective, unlike Jonah’s.
31. In a later variant of this tale type, Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (1883) and its Disney film adaptation (1940) include an episode in which Pinocchio is swallowed by a giant dogfish/whale, respectively, and finds his creator Geppetto living inside. Both versions make use of the “born again” symbolism in that Pinocchio, previously disobedient to the point of wickedness, learns the virtue of selflessness, endangering himself to save Geppetto.
32. Translation from Ogden (2013a: 154).
33. Pausanias does not explicitly state what happened to Menestratus. Possibly he cut his way out as implied in the stories of Perseus and Heracles. See also Ogden (2013a: 147).
34. The Laestrygonians are discussed below. Regarding Cacus, various sources from antiquity describe him as a half-human, three-headed, fire-breathing giant. Supposedly a son of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and the forge, Cacus lived in a vast, labyrinthine cavern on the Aventine Hill in the area that later became Rome. He decorated the entryway to his cave with the rotting faces and limbs of his victims, and the floor of his dwelling was covered with blood and human bones—hence the implied cannibalism (see Vergil, *Aen.* 8.195–7; Ovid, *Fast.* 1.557–8). Heracles encountered Cacus while passing through Italy on his way back from his tenth Labor, capturing the cattle of Geryon. Cacus stole some of those cattle, but when Heracles traced the missing beasts to Cacus’s cave, he beat the giant to death.
35. Charles Segal (1992: 485) explains that the Cyclopes make their appearance in “an unstable conjunction of opposites. They occupy both a Golden Age paradise where ‘trusting to the gods’ they receive the earth’s fruits without toil, and a subhuman condition of dwelling in mountain caves with only a rudimentary social organization and isolated nuclear families (9.106–15). Odysseus’ arrival brings out the negative side of their primitive society, for just this ‘lack of concern for one another’ prevents them from coming to Polyphemos’ aid (cf. 9.399–412) .... Polyphemos, in other words, crystallizes the savage side of the Cyclopes’ precivilized world.” See also Aguirre and Buxton (2020: 139–41), Clare (1998), and Cohen (1996).
36. “Cyclops” literally means “orb-eyed” or “round-eyed” rather than “one-eyed.” Hansen (2002: 295) notes that “apart from their singular appearance” Hesiod’s Cyclopes and those of the *Odyssey* have little in common. For extended discussion of this tale type and interpretation of the monster aspects of the Polyphemos episode, see Aguirre and Buxton (2020), Felton (2018b), and Hansen (2002: 289–301).
37. But they have spears of some sort: “piercing the men like fish, they carried them away for a joyless feast” (*Od.* 10.124)—joyless from Odysseus’s point of view, that is. The phrase seems to refer either to fishing spears or to roasting spits (either of which could have been wooden rather than metal).
38. To a certain extent this is a set scene: Odysseus had similarly stood on a hill and spotted smoke rising from the land of the Laestrygonians. But that land had roads and a city, unlike the isolated home of Circe.

39. Hermes provides Odysseus with an herb that prevents Circe's potion from working. We can also point to similarities between the Polyphemus episode and "Hansel and Gretel": like the children in that tale, who nibble at the witch's house, Odysseus and his men enter the Cyclops' cave and help themselves to his food uninvited, and in each case the intruders end up as the meal.
40. The *empousa* was said to have either donkey legs, or a leg of brass or copper. For a detailed discussion of the *empousa* and *lamia* figures in antiquity, including equating witches and *lamiae*, see Felton (2013).
41. For Canidia, see Horace, *Epode* 17; and her fellow witches, see Horace, *Satire* 1.8, *Epode* 5. For Erictho, see Lucan, *Pharsalia* bk. 6 *passim*.
42. See Ingemark and Asplund Ingemark, Chapter 7. Rather surprisingly, there is no tale type corresponding to this or any other werewolf story.
43. Cemeteries in ancient Greece and Rome were typically situated outside the city border.
44. Literally "skin-changer." On this, and the lack of any specific term equivalent to the English "werewolf," see Ogden (2021).

### Chapter 6

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1. See, for example, Bianchetti, Cataudella, and Gehrke (2016), Bierl, Christopoulos, and Papachrysostomou (2017), de Jong (2012), Gilhuly and Worman (2014), Romm (1992), and Skinner (2012).
2. The story of Odysseus is a form of "The Homecoming Husband" (ATU 974; Hansen 2002: 202–11; Ready 2014). See also Bakker on this story as belonging to Propp's pattern of the hero's quest (2013: 13–35).
3. For example, *Iliad* 1.423–4; 23.204–6; Herodotus 3.23; see also Romm (1992: 49–60) and Skinner (2012: 95–9).
4. On the marvels of India and Indians in the Greek imagination, see Nichols (2011), Romm (1992: 82–120), and Anderson, Chapter 1.
5. The latter is also more specifically identified as "The Magic Flight," including "The Forgotten Fiancée" (ATU 313), cf. Hansen (2002: 151–7); Radermacher (1943). The main literary version of Jason's quest appears in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes (third century BCE).
6. On the mapping of Apollonius' *Argonautica*, see Meyer (2001); on the landmarks mentioned in the pre-Apollonian mythographic tradition, see Fowler (2000–13: 2:217–25).
7. On the dragon- or snake-like nature of Medusa and her Gorgon sisters see Ogden (2013a: 82–3).
8. The other "dragon-slaying" episode in the Perseus myth, the liberation of Andromeda, involves a serpentine sea monster; see also Ogden (2008: 82–7).
9. On folktale elements in the *Odyssey*, see Radermacher (1943: 67–88) and Hölscher (1978, 1989); cf. Crane (1987) and Davies (2002).
10. *Odyssey* 19.467–75 (scar); 21 (bow contest); cf. Hölscher (1989: 64–5).
11. For this "absentation motif," see Propp (1968: 26), where he also notes, "an intensified form of absentation is represented by the death of parents," which operates on the principles of boundaries (life–death; world–netherworld), and not distance.
12. Euripides, *Hippolytus* 792, 807; cf. 281; see also Barret (1964: 31–2, 313–14).

13. Propp (1968: 26–8), where the interdiction strictly relates to the function of absentation, while transgression of the interdiction paves the way for the villain's workings, which in turn result in the misfortune and set the hero on his quest.
14. "The object of search is located in 'another' or 'different' kingdom" (Propp 1968: 50).
15. One possible exception might be Herodotus story of Rhampsinitus's treasury (ATU 950), a seemingly impenetrable chamber—though eventually penetrated by two thieves and subsequently fitted with booby traps (2.121–3). But the legend, the earliest versions of which date to fifth-century BCE Greece, is of allegedly Egyptian provenance, with the name Rhampsinitos possibly a rendering of the Egyptian "Rameses," though referring to no single known pharaoh (Hansen 2002: 357–67). See also discussion in Chapter 5.
16. With the *pthos* likely serving as a metaphor for the womb. The womb was commonly seen as a jar in Hippocratic gynecology, as King points out (2014: 26); cf. Zeitlin (1996: 64–8).
17. The only classical author who mentions curiosity as a motive is Babrius (58.3–6), nearly a millennium after Hesiod.
18. One of the daughters, Pandrosus, was frequently misnamed as Pandora (Philochorus, *FGrH* 328 F 10; *Suda*: s.v. "*protonion*"; *Mythographi Vaticani* 1.48, 51; 3.10.3, 9) even though according to some versions of the myth, she was the only Cecropid who did *not* give in to her curiosity (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.18.2; Apollodorus, *Library* 3.189).
19. On folktale elements in the myth of the Argonauts, see Crane (1987) and Davies (2002: 7–18); cf. Thompson (1946: 278–9).
20. For the labyrinth as a forbidden place, see, for example, Foucault (2004: 82); cf. Doob (1993: 73–8).
21. Though, according to many variants of the myth, Ariadne is eventually found by the god Dionysus, who marries her.
22. This ritual would normally have been performed only on small animals, such as hares, and not on humans.
23. The most complete versions of this story in antiquity appear in Virgil, *Georgics* 4.453–506 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.1–63. In another famous ancient example, Lot's wife violates the sight taboo (Genesis 19:26).
24. Parts of the Sisyphus myth have come down to us via fragments from various authors, including (most likely) two lost plays by Aeschylus, one of which has been summarized by an ancient commentator on the *Iliad*; see *TrGF* 3 F 225–34; *FGrH* 3 F 119.
25. A full version appears in Horace, *Satires* 2.6.80–117; for the Aesopic fable tradition, see also Kenneth Kitchell, Chapter 4.
26. Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Library* 3.13.1–3. See also see Hansen (2002: 125–6).
27. On the rites of passage in ancient Greece, see, for example, Dodd and Faraone (2013); Padilla (1999); Rutherford and Lefèvre-Novaro (2014); Vidal-Naquet (1968). On the labyrinth, see, for example, Conty (2002) and Doob (1993).
28. On the liminal nature of Scheria, see, for example, Segal (1962: 17–63; 1967: 116, 321), Dougherty (2001: 103), and Montiglio (2005: 9–10).
29. On the *locus amoenus* in Cupid and Psyche story see, for example, Zimmermann (2004: 114).
30. As suggested by Lefkowitz, this sensational account may be derived (as in most other cases) from a lost poem of Ibycus (2012: 41).



31. For the entire story, see Gascou (2006: 121–5); for a summary, see Doroszewska (n.d.). See also Duffy (1984: 72).
32. For a summary of the *Life*, see Rizos (n.d.); see also Laniado (1995), and Maraval (1990).
33. On the Roman expression, see Néraudau (1978); Otto (1890: 320–1, no. 1638).
34. On the age of sixty-five, another boundary-line of the elderly, see Finney (1981: 156).

### Chapter 7

1. All Greek and Latin translations are by Camilla Asplund Ingemark.
2. See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.32–4.54; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 1.2–1.20; Hansen (2002: 12); Heath (2011: 73–6); and Sandy (1970: 474).
3. On Horace's ambivalent views, see Spencer (2006).
4. This story was so popular that it became a tale type (ATU 293). This fable is also told about the belly and the feet with a similar moral (Hansen 2017: 395–6; P 130, G 66; cf. Gowers 1995: 25).
5. The Augustan *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*, enacted in 17 BCE, punished adultery with banishment and, in some cases, death. From a strictly legal perspective, Melissa and her late “husband” Terentius had not entered formal marriage; however, they were living in a marriage-like union, *contubernium*, which was common among slaves.
6. Aristophanes, *Vespae* 11.74–9; Strabo, *Geographia* 1.2.8; Dio Chrysostomos, *Orationes* 4.72–4 and 55.10–11; Lucian, *Philopseudes* 2; Libanius, *Orationes* 33.42.7; Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 15 (*Moralia* 1040b); Clemens of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 6; Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* 3; Scobie (1979: 245–6; 1983: 22–3).
7. “The Tale of Two Brothers” is often cited as the oldest known folktale on record, though this has been questioned (see Dundes 2002).
8. Both Euripides' *Hippolytus* and the Roman dramatist Seneca's *Phaedra* include the “three wishes” motif, on which see Kohn (2008).
9. On crucifixion as regular punishment, see Cook (2014: 55); on need for a proper burial, see Felton (1999: 9–10).

### Chapter 8

1. And even the gods had to obey Fate. The most notable example of this appears in Homer's *Iliad* (16.431–49), when Zeus's mortal son Sarpedon is about to be slain in battle. Zeus seriously considers interfering to save Sarpedon's life, but the god's wife Hera reminds him that any circumvention of Sarpedon's fated death would result in anarchy among the gods: If Zeus does not allow Fate to take its course, why should they? So Zeus stays his hand, and mourns his son's death.
2. On the helper-maiden, see Griffiths (2012: 35–6) and Hansen (2002: 151–60).
3. In contrast, King Laius tries to avoid a prophecy by attempting to let his son Oedipus perish, as does King Acrisius, who sets his daughter Danaë and her son Perseus adrift in the sea in a chest. Trying to avoid a prophecy never works out well in Greek myth, in apparent contrast to the Egyptian tale of “The Doomed Prince” (see Chapter 5).
4. Periander was technically a *tyrannos* or “tyrant.” In ancient Greece this meant simply a ruler who had seized power illegally or inherited it from one who had, and was

thus distinguished from a monarch. Periander had inherited rule of Corinth from his father Cypselus, who had overthrown the ruling family (the Bacchiads) with a combination of support from his followers and an oracle from Delphi. Eventually, because many tyrants (including those of ancient Greece) abused their power, the word acquired its current sense of an exceeding cruel and oppressive leader.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Greek and Latin are my own. They tend toward the idiomatic rather than the strictly literal, and of course any errors are also mine.
6. “Oracles of the dead” were locations in the ancient world at which (supposedly) the spirits of the dead could be summoned for the purposes of prophecy (including not only telling the future but knowledge of information in the present). For discussion about these oracles and the academic controversies related to them (e.g., regarding not just their location but their existence and function), see, for example, Friese (2018), Johnston (2002), and Ogden (2001).
7. In Chapter 2 Lelli discusses the origin and transmission of this tale.
8. Another similar tale type is ATU 51\*\*\*, “The Fox as Umpire to Divide Cheese,” in which two (rather than three) animals fight over some food, such as cheese or meat, and ask a fox (or other animal) to judge the case, whereupon the fox eats it himself (Uther 2004: 1:71, 47).
9. These qualities—intelligence and cleverness—were valued across the ancient Near East and Mediterranean down the centuries. Odysseus remains a primary example, but see also the story of Rhampsinitus and the thief below, with further comments.
10. The earliest parts of the *Midrash* date to the fourth or possibly even second century CE, though much of the content is probably considerably older; the latest parts date to the thirteenth century.
11. Allusions to this fable appear in Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1448, *Lysistrata* 695, and *Peace* 127–34.
12. For a detailed discussion of the motifs and variants of this tale type, including Greek versions that place less emphasis on the king, see Hansen (2002: 362–71). For a possible earlier version, the Mesopotamian tale known as “The Poor Man of Nippur,” see Jason (1979).
13. These themes—of intelligence and cleverness prevailing over force and cruelty, and of a poor man rising to higher social status thanks to these qualities—also appear throughout *The Thousand and One Nights*.
14. Translations from “The Lion and the Mouse” by Laura Gibbs (2002b).
15. And *Fantasia 2000*. The Disney version, using Paul Dukas’s 1897 symphonic poem, is based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1797 poem “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” (*Der Zauberlehrling*), which traces its ancestry to the ancient Greek tale.
16. For the most complete discussion of the entire *Philopseudes* to date, see Ogden (2007).
17. Lucian here and elsewhere in the *Philopseudes* mocks the belief that inanimate objects could be imbued with life. This belief probably had its basis in the idea that spirits could possess such objects and cause them to move about. This concept, in turn, relates to stories in which the gods imbue inert materials with life, such as the story of Pandora, brought to life from clay by Zeus, and of Pygmalion’s statue, brought to life from ivory by Venus (Felton 2001: 75; see also Haluszka 2008). The *Greek Magical Papyri*, for example, provide a “recipe” for acquiring an animate magical assistant made out of mulberry wood (Betz 1992: 71).

18. The principal and largely hagiographical account of Apollonius, the *Vita Apollonii* by Philostratus the Athenian (c. 170–245 CE), describes the sage’s efforts on behalf of society, which included exorcisms and resurrections (however fraudulent they might or might not have been in actuality). Lucian himself wrote an entire work about another alleged miracle-worker, Alexander of Abonouteichos (c. 105–170 CE), arguing that the man was a complete fraud who bilked people out of their money (*Alexander the False Prophet*).
19. Cf. Adrados (1999–2003: 1:176–7, 251). A fragment of the archaic Greek poet Archilochus (c. 650 BCE) probably refers to this fable, with comment on appropriate behavior at a gathering; see Steiner (2016, esp. 119). On fable in Archilochus and the Archaic Period, see also Lelli, Chapter 2. In contrast to some Asian attitudes toward the monkey (e.g., in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and in the Chinese story of the Monkey King), the ancient Greeks considered monkeys dishonest, cowardly, and sometimes comical (Kostuch 2017: 75).
20. As opposed to the daughter of Cheops, Rhampsinitus’s successor. Herodotus says Cheops “was so very evil” that he forced his own daughter into prostitution to help pay for his pyramid (Herodotus 2.126.1).
21. Regarding Danaë’s confinement in the tower, one obvious interpretation is that the father wishes to keep his daughter from growing up. Compare the similar subtexts of Rapunzel, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty in regard to confinement and extended slumbers (cf. Bettelheim 1975: 277–80; and below).
22. Hansen (2002: 316–27) argues that the story of Gyges and his descendants bears a structural resemblance to “Our Lady’s Child” (ATU 710). See also discussion in Cohen (2004).
23. See Bettelheim (1975: 277–80). On how “Cupid and Psyche” and related tales deal with marriage practices and the issue of female agency, see Duggan (2019).
24. Paraphrased from Nathan Ausubel’s longer version ([1948] 1977: 567). His adaptation is based on Talmudic sources, including *Abodah Zarah* 3:1, 42c, *Numbers Rabbah* 13: 4, and *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 11, 28b–29a.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Graham Anderson** is Emeritus Professor of Classics at the University of Kent, UK. His special interests are in ancient fiction and cultural history. He has published most recently on fantasy in Greek and Roman Literature, and has produced an anthology of ancient fairy tale and folktale (both 2020). He is currently engaged in a study of intellectuals in the early Roman Empire.

**Camilla Asplund Ingemark** is Senior Lecturer in Ethnology at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University/Campus Gotland, Sweden. Her fields of interest include oral narrative, ancient folklore, folklore and literature, the history of emotions (especially in the ancient world), Old Norse studies, and environmental humanities. She has worked with ancient Roman folk narrative, nineteenth-century Finnish-Swedish folktales and legends, and contemporary vernacular conceptions of climate change. Her books include the edited volume *The Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling* (2013) and *Representations of Fear: Verbalising Emotion in Ancient Roman Folk Narrative* (2020), coauthored with Dominic Ingemark.

**Julia Doroszewska** is Research Associate at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Her interests lie in the areas of Greek and Latin literature, paradoxography, Christian miracle collections, and the ancient novel. She has published on liminality and space in Greek and Roman prose of the imperial period and late antiquity. Her book, *The Monstrous World: Corporeal Discourses in Phlegon of Tralles' Mirabilia*, was published in 2016.

**Debbie Felton** is Professor of Classics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA. Her research, which is interdisciplinary by nature, focuses on folklore

in ancient Greece and Rome. Her books include *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost Stories from Classical Antiquity* (1999), the edited volume *Landscapes of Dread in Classical Antiquity: Negative Emotion in Natural and Constructed Spaces* (2018), and *Monsters and Monarchs: Serial Killers in Classical Myth and History* (2021). She has been Editor of the journal *Preternature* since 2015.

**Dominic Ingemark** is Senior Lecturer in Classical Archaeology and Ancient History at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, Sweden. His research interests include ancient folklore (particularly ancient Roman folk narrative), Roman social history, Roman foodways, Roman horticulture and agriculture, Roman glass, and Roman-native relations (focusing on Roman Iron Age Scotland and Scandinavia). In 2014 he published the monograph *Glass, Alcohol and Power in Roman Iron Age Scotland*.

**Kenneth Kitchell**, Professor Emeritus of Classics, taught high school Latin before holding positions at Louisiana State University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA. His research centers on pedagogy and on animals in antiquity and the Middle Ages. With Irvén Resnick he published the first English translation of Albertus Magnus' *De animalibus* (1999, rev. edn. 2018). His *Animals in the Greek and Roman World A–Z* (2013) was named a *Choice* magazine Outstanding Academic Title. His most recent books include *The Other Middle Ages: A Medieval Latin Reader* (2016) and *They Said It First: The Wit and Wisdom of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (2019).

**Janek Kucharski** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. Among his research interests are Greek tragedy, law and rhetoric, and aspects of the reception of antiquity. He has published several papers on Athenian drama, law, and oratory as well as annotated translations of Hyperides (2016) and of Antiphon and Dinarchus (2020) into Polish.

**Emanuele Lelli** teaches Greek and Latin at the Liceo Tasso and collaborates with Sapienza University, Rome, Italy. His research specialties include Hellenistic poetry, ancient scientific and technical literature, paremiography, and ancient and modern popular culture. His books include *Folklore antico e moderno* (2014), *Sud antico* (2016), and *Pastori antichi e moderni* (2017). For years he has mentored groups of young scholars, producing critical editions of Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica* (*Il seguito dell'Iliade*, 2013), Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Adages* (*Adagi*, 2013), and Dictys of Crete's *Ephemeris belli Troiani* (*L'altra Iliade*, 2015). He is also coordinating a dictionary of popular culture of the ancient world.

**Serinity Young** is Research Associate in the Division of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Queens College, New York, USA. Her research focuses on gender issues in Asian texts, material culture, and rituals; healing and medicine; dream theory; and archaeology. Her most recent book is *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females* (2018).

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